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FROM OUT OF THE GARDEN

by CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

MAUDE SETON, AGED TWENTY-eight, was a girl who trotted around the city of New York in the most bizarre high-fashion clothing she could find, with a very thin attaché case hanging by a strap from one shoulder as the badge of the newspaperwoman she was hell-bent to be. Nobody loved her; nobody even liked her; but Maude Seton had settled, long ago, for just being envied. She was already an aggressive and accomplished pest.

She was swinging down a side street one summer afternoon, plotting how to "angle" the assignment she had nagged out of Ben Crawley a few days before.

"Okay, toots," Ben had said wearily. "How about twelve hundred words, for January, on the fifteenth anniversary of the mysterious disappearance of the famous and beloved Elizabeth Rose?"

"Aw, come on, Ben. You know I purely hate sugar."

"Take it or leave it," he had said. "But kindly and firmly leave my midst. I got work."

"Okay, toots," she had said. "Maybe I'll solve the mystery. When Seton digs, she digs."

Maude had already ferreted out the daughter and had talked to her. Today she had an appointment with the husband and the mother. The old house, for which she was now bound, was the only residence that still stood on the south side of the street, where it seemed stuffed in at the bottom of a tall crack between towering new office buildings.

Maude skipped up the steps, noting that this brownstone had once been remodeled; its face had been covered with white brick, although the white had turned dingy, and the green paint on the door was no longer bright.

A small gray-haired woman, with plump and matronly contours, opened the door. She was, she said,

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Mrs. Allen, the housekeeper, and would Miss Seton please come in? Mr. Mortmain would be down in a moment. Sniffing and peering, Maude followed her in.

The entire house was only about twenty-five feet wide. At Maude's left, as she entered, a gray-carpeted stairway went up, almost immediately. At her right a white door was ajar, and she caught a glimpse of a fairly modern kitchen. The passage seemed very long and narrow, between the stairway and the wall, and it ended with three steps leading down into a large sitting room which overlooked, through a wide glass door—of all things!—a garden.

Maude, frankly staring all around and storing up things to describe, caught a glimpse of the dining area adjoining the kitchen—up three steps as if it were a stage. She could see in her mind's eye the famous beauty sweeping her guests to a little late supper.

"Are these her things?" she asked with the expected awe.

"Very little has changed," said the woman. Cold light from the garden beyond the glass door was falling on the pale and delicate texture of her skin. "That is her piano. That is her portrait, of course."

"Oh, yes," said Maude, who had seen it as a print. Over the mantel (where else?) hung Elizabeth Rose. Oh, Gawd, thought Maude, observing the pink and white of the face, the flat-topped hairdo that now looked so antique, the gold of the curls, the baby-blue of the eyes, the pink and simpering mouth, the white lace dress with the rosebuds on it. How utterly *icky!*

Maude turned to look out at the garden. Beyond a pavement of cemented brick, some grass was trying unsuccessfully to be a lawn around a central bird bath. There was one discouraged-looking tree. But at the far end, massed in an arc, there was a bank of tall marguerites.

"How unusual to see a garden in the city," said Maude. She spotted the wrought-iron supports. "Oh, I see the balcony. That's where the child fell, isn't it?"

"Won't you please be comfortable," said Mrs. Allen primly.

"I've met Mrs. Sidney, you know—Miss Rose's daughter," said Maude chattily, not sitting down yet. "She and her husband sailed for Europe this morning, I believe."

"Is that so?"

"A nice girl," said Maude, who thought Barbara Sidney deserved this flabby adjective. "The deformed arm isn't conspicuous at all, is it?"

"I am glad to hear that," said Mrs. Allen quietly.

"She couldn't tell me a thing about the night her mother vanished, having been in the hospital at the time, and only six years old, besides. She has never lived here since?—Barbara, I mean."

"No," said the housekeeper.

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"There is only her stepfather here and her invalid grandmother. A little too depressing for a young person."

"I see." Maude tended to agree. This place had charm, but it was an embalmed charm. "Were you here?"

"Not at that time," the woman said coldly.

Maude thought the garden was really weird. On three sides were the blank twenty-odd-story walls of three office buildings. What bird would be caught dead in that ridiculous bird bath? The patch of garden must be like the bottom of a well.

"May I just step out?" she asked.

The housekeeper said, "Oh, no. Please sit down. I'm sure Mr. Philip —"

"Miss Seton?" a man said.

Maude Seton knew that her latest costume must be silhouetted against that gray light, in all its saucy outlines, but that her face was in shadow. She was glad of it. Maude had had, of course, the usual casual adventures, but she hadn't been exactly enchanted by any of her temporary partners. Her first sight of this man was sending a ripple along her nerves that was quite a shock to her.

He was tall, a little stooped, elegantly thin, with dark hair and a face that seemed surprisingly unlined. It was pale; he had no outdoor look. But he seemed very, very male just the same. Even his clothing had some quality of elegance she couldn't define, although it was verging on shabbiness. And there was something—her heart had actually jumped.

Maude resented this fiercely. She went into her pitch. Her Editor felt so-and-so. People were still so-o-o interested. She sat down. So did he. "I am hoping," said Maude, "that I can give the story a little touch of something new."

"I don't know what that could be," he said sadly.

"Fifteen years ago, next January? Tell me—"

So they went through the well-known biography—the familiar list of great, and now classic, musicals in which Elizabeth Rose had starred, and all the worn-out anecdotes of Elizabeth Rose's heyday in the theater. Philip Mortmain had a pleasant voice and he spoke willingly, yet he gave the impression of being a very quiet man.

Maude was dying to ask how old he was, but she refrained. (She could find that out easily enough in the files.) He was the famous star's third husband, and sometimes these women, ageless themselves, kept marrying younger and younger men.

"Everybody knows," she said, "that your wife disappeared on the night that little Barbara fell. Do you think that might have been, in some way, pertinent?"

"Elizabeth was certainly very much upset," he said gravely.

"She wasn't in the house when it happened?"

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"No. Barby was already in the hospital when Elizabeth came home. By that time the child had been in surgery and was all right, you know. Elizabeth saw her in the hospital, of course. But then she followed the venerable tradition. The show must go on, mustn't it?" He smiled at her.

"I understand she gave a brilliant performance," said Maude, a little cattily. "You were in the theater that night, Mr. Mortmain?"

"Oh, yes. But after the curtain I was detained by some friends who had heard about Barby and were concerned. By the time I reached backstage, Elizabeth wasn't there."

"And no one has ever seen her since." Maude sighed. "It *is* a famous mystery."

"I suppose so," he said wearily.

"But I wonder." Maude leaned forward in her taut and forceful way. "I couldn't help noticing that this neighborhood has deteriorated. Why do you stay on here, Mr. Mortmain?"

"Why, because," he said gently, "One of these days Elizabeth may return."

Oh, now, come on! thought Maude. You can't really believe that! "Elizabeth has never been declared legally—?"

"Dead?" he supplied. "Oh, no."

"But she must have had a considerable estate." Maude was thinking, All those hits! And this piece of land alone must be worth a fortune.

"Elizabeth's estate is in the hands of trustees," he told her patiently. "A bank allows funds for the maintenance of her home, the care of her mother, the education of her daughter, and the board and keep of her husband." His voice was very calm.

"I see. But surely some day—"

"Some day it will all belong to Barbara."

Ah, so? thought Maude. It will, will it?

"What do you do, Mr. Mortmain?" she asked him boldly.

"Oh, I dabble. Read. Study."

"You used to be in the theater, yourself?"

"A long time ago." He smiled.

"I see," said Maude. To keep on feeling attracted toward this man was perfectly ridiculous, so she took care to think, cynically: Turning on the old charm, aren't you, my friend? She rose energetically. "Now, may I see the garden?"

He rose. "You can see it all from here, Miss Seton."

"I'd like to go out there."

"I'd rather you didn't," he said gently.

Maude gazed rebelliously through the glass door and said, with a bit of an edge, "How does your garden grow? There can't be any sun."

"No, not any more."

"Those are potted plants?"

"Yes. Elizabeth was always very proud of her garden. That means, you know, a walled or guarded place. I'm afraid the city is overdoing the walls just now. No, nothing

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really grows. When those fade I'll bring in chrysanthemums."

"Because," she snapped, so outraged that she let it show, "she may yet return?"

She was thinking, what *is* this? An obsession? Is he really languishing around here, still romantically in love with darling Elizabeth, who is going to show up any minute, after fifteen years? What a waste! I don't think I believe it.

"Mr. Philip?" The housekeeper spoke behind them. "Mrs. Rose is ready to see the young lady now."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Allen. Thank you. Miss Seton, I know that you wish to speak to Elizabeth's mother, but may I ask you not to talk too long? Mrs. Rose has not been well. Will you watch me, please, for a signal?"

"I promise," said Maude.

At the foot of the stairs he let her go first, with old-fashioned good manners—the man behind in case of a fall. Upstairs he led her along another narrow hall, this one neatly wallpapered, and then into a large bedroom that also looked out on the garden. Across its bank of windows and another glass door ran the white wrought-iron tracery of the balcony's low rail.

But Maude only glanced that way. She bent her attention to the woman who was propped high in the huge bed, against white satin pillows.

"I have been admiring your garden," said Maude, when the introductions were over. She didn't know what else to say. This woman was ill, all right. Her wrists were thin to mere bone. Her face was fallen in—the gray flesh sagged. Her white hair was disagreeably streaked with yellow. And her eyes! Ah, so, thought Maude, is the poor old crone loopy?

Philip Mortmain began to prompt the conversation. Maude noticed that the housekeeper remained standing silently in the room, as the woman in the bed started to speak of her daughter with such idolatrous praise that Maude felt sickened. It seemed that Elizabeth Rose had been the most beautiful, the most charming, the most talented, and the kindest, the sweetest . . . Was there a cult? Was this house a shrine?

But Maude, as she listened, began to watch more closely those slippery eyes, and the old lips which said, "Philip adored her, of course."

"Of course," he agreed softly.

So Maude said, in polite malice, "Your daughter was married three times, I believe, Mrs. Rose?"

"Yes, my daughter—" The eyes fled; the old lips began to tremble.

Philip Mortmain rose and said, "We mustn't tire you. Mrs. Allen, we'll go down for tea now."

"Yes, Mr. Philip." The housekeeper went away.

But Maude Seton ignored the signal. She did not rise from the low chair. "I would so like to have known your daughter," she gushed. "Tell me—"

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Whatever the old woman was mumbling, she couldn't hear, because Mortmain's hand took hold of Maude's arm and pulled her up. "Please excuse Miss Seton now?"

"Yes," said the old woman with a sigh. She gazed out at the shadowy space—toward the garden where no sun shone and nothing grew.

He took Maude forcefully along the upper hall, saying nothing. Oh, he was angry. But at the stairs he let go of her, and as a gentleman should, he started down first. So Maude, behind his back—because he couldn't order her around, no man could!—turned and scooted back as fast as she could to pop her head into that room. The old woman lifted on one bony elbow.

"Where is your daughter?" Maude spoke low, but in her own forceful and insistent manner.

"My daughter is buried in the garden," the old woman whispered, with terror in her eyes, and sank back.

Philip Mortmain came behind Maude and put cruel hands on her shoulders. "I thought I had dropped my pen," she cooed, but he said nothing. He wasn't going to let her loose again. Mrs. Allen, going up swiftly, passed them on the stairs, heading toward the sound of weeping in the bedroom. Her look was severe. There would be no tea.

At the bottom of the stairs the man said coldly, "I don't believe you will have any trouble finding a photograph—*somewhere else*." (He was going to put her out, was he? Well, Maude had been put out of better places.) "You will mail me a copy of what you write," he said sternly. "If I do not approve, you will not submit it to the magazine. That was agreed."

"Of course. I promised. And thank you very—"

But she was now back on the stoop and the door was shut. Maude ran down the steps, savoring her bruises. Yah, yah! All that guff about she-may-return. Romantic devotion—in a pig's eye! He'd boss Seton around, would he? Well, we'll see.

Two days later she had Ben Crawley cornered in a cocktail lounge. "I'm not going along with the gag, Ben. There's something phony about the whole bit. For one thing, this dame was married three times, and that doesn't make her the sweet dewy little rose she was cracked up to be. Not in Maudie's book, it doesn't. Thirty-one when she so-called vanished. She'd be forty-six today. He's only thirty-eight—I looked it up."

"Who is only thirty-eight?"

"Mortmain. Mr. Dead Hand."

"I'm supposed to be shuddering?"

"You are supposed to be listening. I dug up her first husband. Sol Divine. That's his name, believe it or not. He didn't want to talk. Says it was all a long time ago. He forgets. You bet! I get the feeling that Elizabeth Rose may not have been

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all sweetness and light. This Sol is bald as an eagle, which he slightly resembles—a real solid type. Fat jolly wife and a pack of kids around. Elizabeth divorced him. The second husband, Barby's father, she divorced, too. He's dead."

"This is news?" said Ben sourly.

"So listen. The day the kid lands on those bricks and greensticks her bones so they never do grow even, guess who was in the house? Servants' day off. Elizabeth wasn't there. So who? None other than Mr. Philip Mortmain, the kid's stepfather. Now, don't tell Maudie that a young sprout of twenty-three, madly in love with gorgeous, adorable, fabulous Elizabeth Rose, is going to be all that nuts about a six-year-old brat of hers from a former marriage.

"Say our Phil happens to get peeved at the brat and happens to kind of push her off that balcony? Oh, well, he didn't mean it, and besides, nobody's there to see. So he calls Doc. Ambulance. Hospital. Surgery. When Elizabeth shows up in a cab, he takes her tenderly in his arms, says the kid had an accident. Elizabeth goes to bedside and emotes. Then to the theater for her brilliant performance. Yah!

"But whaddaya say, afterwards the great lady gets home like usual? Late, and the cook asleep in the basement. *Now* she finds out what really happened to the kid. So, she *not* being all sweetness and light, they get into a knockdown drag-out fight, and pretty soon, by gosh, there she is. Dead.

"Maybe he didn't mean that either, but what's Philip going to do? The kid can't remember a thing—she told me so herself. So she's no problem. But a dead rich wife, whose name means front-page headlines, that's inconvenient."

"Just come on out of the gaslight, willya, kiddo?" Crawley gulped liquor.

"How come dear Philip—who looks as if he crawled right out of Edgar Allan Poe, believe me, Ben—how come he hangs on to that house? How come he doesn't sell it for one hell of a lot of money and go enjoy life, aged thirty-eight? How come he's got his sick old semi-loopy mother-in-law *imprisoned* there?"

"Naaaah!"

"You just listen," said Maude. "Because I'm telling you that old woman was looking mighty sly. You should have seen her little old eyes peeking at me, by the corners. But *they* were in the room, you know. Not only Philip but the housekeeper, too. Taking no chances. So I'll tell you why Philip doesn't have Elizabeth declared legally dead, which he could do, and sell that house. He *can't* sell it. Somebody would build, dig up the garden. Elizabeth Rose is buried in that garden and the old lady knows it."

Crawley was shaking his head sadly from side to side.

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"She told me so," said Maude.

"Who did?"

"The old lady."

"She told you *what*?"

"She said these very exact words. 'My daughter is buried in the garden.' Verbatim, my friend."

Maude explained and Ben said, "Take it to the cops, toots. You're not selling it to me."

"The old woman is half nuts, I will admit. But I'll tell you what I'm *going* to do. Little Maudie's going to find out."

"Pinch yourself first, kiddo."

"Oh, I don't know. He's living easy, meanwhile. After the old lady conks out, she can't talk. Maybe he figures to leave the house vacant—"

"And this housekeeper keeps quiet?"

"Oh, in the meanwhile," said Maude nastily, "this housekeeper is pretty well-preserved."

Ben Crawley looked at her with distaste. "Get away from me," he said. "For your own sake, Seton, I'm warning you, get off this kick."

"Don't you worry about me being murdered," said Maude, "I don't walk around unarmed, you know. I've got a little idea dreamed up."

"Say, what's all this?" said Ben with sudden intuitive suspicion. "How come you took such a prejudice against this Philip Mortmain?" He was gratified to see the blood rise in Seton's cheeks.

"Oh, he's *charming*," she said viciously, "but nobody can charm the brain out of my head, you know."

"Go, soak your head, why don't you, Seton?" said Ben gloomily. "And while you're at it, run a little soap around the inside. I want no part of this."

"You'll be on your knees, friend," said Maude confidently.

Maude got nowhere with the Police Department. Their backs were up; they didn't like her. So she researched old news accounts and the police reports in them. She discovered that by the day after the significant day Philip Mortmain's mother-in-law had been in the house. Ah, so? thought Maude. And never got out again?

The only servant mentioned was a Mrs. Pelham, the cook, and Maude was disappointed to find that this woman had died four years ago. Oh, well, there was still the little idea that she'd dreamed up.

She banged out a sugary story, working in her messy little apartment where she never entertained because she didn't know how. On the top copy she typed one extra final paragraph. That should do it. And when it did, she would know she wasn't wasting time, no matter how long the digging might take.

Digging? Yah! Under the bird bath? She wondered . . .

Whenever she was in the streets, Maude carried a gadget with her, manufactured by a firm that had scented profit from the plight of women-alone-on-a-city-street in this

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year-of-our-Lord. It was a small gun that fired tear gas and was supposed to enable a woman to blind and thus escape an attacker.

So Maude Seton, with her attaché case holding the top copy of her story, and with the little gas gun in her pocket, convenient to her right hand, went swinging down that street one afternoon, uninvited, unexpected, and hell-bent.

He opened the door himself. She felt the same shock. He *was* like something out of Poe. Yet what else was it about him? Maybe I go for murderers, thought Maude—they're usually strong characters. An extension of this flickered through her mind. *Stronger than I am?*

She dismissed the thought quickly and said, as girlishly as possible, "I've written the story, Mr. Mortmain. Will you please read it, now? It's very short, and I do need your approval, right away."

So he let her in, led her to the room overlooking the garden, and took the typescript. She sat down as near as she could to the passage leading to the street door; she kept her right hand in her pocket.

Ordinarily Maude Seton would rather be whipped than watch anybody read her stuff. But this time she kept count of the pages as they slipped behind each other in his lean hands. She wasn't afraid, she told herself. She had a weapon. She could escape. She would see what he would do when he realized he hadn't fooled Maude Seton.

He came to the last page and Maude braced herself. She had written, in the final paragraph. "The whole story has never been told. Only Mr. Philip Mortmain knows how angry his wife became that night when she discovered what he had done to her child. Only Mr. Philip Mortmain knows where he buried the beautiful body of Elizabeth Rose—in her own garden."

His eyes raced. He froze. His hands crushed the sheets of paper into a twisted roll. He sprang from the chair, holding the paper as if it were a club.

Maude pulled the weapon out of her pocket. "Hold it, mister," she commanded. But he didn't recognize the threat——he was too close to her. She shut her eyes and pulled the trigger.

She heard him roar. She squinted and saw him stagger. He had dropped the typescript and was pawing his face. Maude nipped out of her chair and down the passage. He roared again and it gave her a deep satisfaction. She reached the street door and yanked it open. She heard a woman's voice call down the stairs, "Philip?"

Maude Seton's brain knew that although she had infuriated him, she had not found out anything conclusively. She slammed the street door. But she had not gone through it. She slipped, instead, through the white door to the kitchen, and stood, hidden and trembling, against the kitchen wall. One of her own

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eyes was streaming. She made her hands check her little gadget and cause another cartridge to take position for another shot. She could always get out. But first, she must find out.

She could hear his shuffling progress. He must be blind, but she looked behind her for a hiding place. She was startled when her cheek came into contact with a telephone on the kitchen wall. So much the better. Where was he now?

"Philip, what's happened?" The woman must be on the stairs.

"Where is that Seton?" he raged.

"I heard the front door slam. Somebody went out?"

"She's gone? You don't see her?"

"I don't see anyone. Philip, are you *crying*? What—"

Now another woman's voice shrilled, "Philip? Darling? Oh, what is it? What's the matter?"

"I'm all right," he called. He must be just the other side of the kitchen wall. "Nothing to worry you, dearest." Then he lowered his voice. "Don't come down. The place is full of some sort of gas."

"But why?" Now Maude recognized the first voice—the housekeeper's.

"That little monster wrote that I buried Elizabeth in the garden," he said bitterly.

The other voice above was screaming. "Darling, if anything's happened to you, I can't bear it! You know I can't! Darling, come up. Please!"

"Oh, hush, Elizabeth," said the housekeeper wearily.

"I'm coming, Elizabeth," he called up.

"Hadn't we better phone?" said the housekeeper.

"I can't see to phone. Can't come up yet. You go to her."

"Yes, and I'll phone."

Maude heard the stairs creak. Then shuffling. The street door must have opened because fresh air crept around the partition to where she was. Phone? she thought, feeling stunned. Phone for what? What do they mean, *Elizabeth*?

Holding the gas gun firmly in her right hand, she shifted position and with her left hand lifted the kitchen telephone from its moorings.

". . . can't you get in touch with Dr. Carlson quickly?" the housekeeper was saying on another instrument. "Mrs. Rose has been badly upset and we need him—as soon as he can possibly get here."

"Right away, Mrs. Allen," said a girl's voice.

Maude hung up. She had better get out and go somewhere and *think*. But what if he were standing at the door to the street? She listened to the old house, which had its mysterious noises. Finally she began to slide softly sideways toward the crack of the door.

He caught her forearms from behind and dragged her backward. He had come from the dining room. "Drop it," he commanded. Mrs. Al-

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len pushed through to the kitchen. "Take that thing away from her," he ordered. The woman's small hands fought at Maude's fingers. Then her weapon was gone.

"So there *was* someone on the extension," said the woman indignantly. "You rotten little sneak! What shall we do with her? We'll have to—"

"No time," he said. "Go up. Say I'll be right there."

Maude Seton, with her arms pinned behind her, thought she might be murdered in another instant. She had one glimpse of his red-rimmed eyes, as he wrestled her across the sitting room to the wide opening where the glass door had been slid aside, to air the room. But he simply put her out into the garden, closed the glass door, locked it, and went away.

Maude stood still, all her feathers ruffled, frightened, of course, and yet in a curious way, delighted. She called on her wits. Get out. (He couldn't do this to her!) But how *could* she get out? She didn't dare throw her body against the glass door to break it. She would find a heavy stone.

She ran across the bricks toward the bird bath. There were no stones. She searched with her eyes for some opening, some gap, some way out of here besides the way back through the house; but all around her rose those tall, blank, eyeless, earless walls.

Then she was among the flowers at the far end. Here were the pots—rather, the black metal cans. She could drag one of them and heave it at the glass. Too heavy. Pull out the plant? Dump out the soil? She grubbed at roots. Wait! He would hear the breaking of the glass.

But what other way out? She was locked in at the bottom of a twenty-odd-story well? Maude began to feel the adrenalin of panic in her blood. She would choke, faint. No. She held her cheeks and told herself to think. Think, Seton, think! It wasn't so much that she refused to be murdered. She *wouldn't* be licked. Then she literally saw a light.

She hurried back toward the house. There was only one thing to do. She could climb one of the wrought-iron supports of the balcony. Perhaps, if the old woman was alone, she could get in, through the door or a window, scoot through that lamplit bedroom, down the stairs, and out. Or hide.

So she cast off her attaché case and put her foot in among the curving designs. It was better to be climbing. The exertion relieved her panic. She drew slowly upward. She could hear nothing from the house. There was only the constant roaring of the city, outside this horribly deep well that she was in. As her head drew to the level of the balcony floor, Maude made herself move very, very slowly.

She could see into the bedroom easily, through the glass door. A yellowish lamplight spilled out. The

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old woman was visible in the bed, high against the fat and shining pillows. She was in tension. Her hands were hooked into each other by curved fingers and the fingers pulled against each other. Her neck cords were tight. She was staring across the room—but not staring Maude's way.

Maude could see no one else in the room. This seemed strange. Then she heard the glass door below rumble. Then she heard his voice. "Come down from there," it commanded softly.

Not me, friend! Maude's foot hunted for a higher notch. Her hands on the railing pulled and, slowly she went higher, higher, over the low railing, onto the balcony—

In the room the old woman's hands let go of each other. The thin arms flashed; she threw off the covering and leaped out of bed. She was wearing a long nightgown of some filmy pink stuff. Her emaciated body fled, like something wild, with a knifing action of those old sharp knees, and the woman was screaming, screaming, as she vanished into the upper hall.

Maude saw the other woman, that Mrs. Allen, rise up out of a wing chair, look once Maude's way, and then hurry after the old woman. There was one long echoing cry. The man below shouted, and she knew he was running.

Scrambling and clinging, Maude went back over the railing, down the wrought-iron support, and dropped to the ground. Yes, the glass door below was open. Maude picked up her attaché case and crept inside. Where were they? Could she escape now?

She looked down the passage and saw that she could not. He was kneeling over a heap of the pink stuff lying at the bottom of the stairway. As Maude watched, the housekeeper came out of the kitchen, carrying a long cloth. Maude seemed to know that it was a tablecloth. The woman began to spread it over that fallen heap. The man slid back to let her do this, but he did not rise.

Then the housekeeper saw Maude. She touched the man's shoulder gently and began to walk in Maude's direction. Maude shrank backward in the heavy, heavy silence of this house.

She made herself remember that this woman now had the weapon. But the woman did not brandish it. She said, "Sit down. We knew we'd have to tell you. She's dead now, so I'll tell you. Sit down."

Maude sat, scheming how to elude the woman and the weapon and the man who was still so near the only exit. It seemed necessary for Maude to keep on believing in her own peril. She wondered if there really was a doctor coming.

"My daughter Elizabeth," the woman said, and Maude's whirling thoughts came to attention, "used to do her breathing exercises and calisthenics on the balcony. Little Barby forgot to take them seriously that

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day, and when Elizabeth's arms flung out with her usual impatience, they hit the child and Barby fell over the low railing."

She wavered for an instant, but a look of strength came over her face and she stiffened. "It was Philip who rushed the child to the hospital where what could be done for her was done," she said unemotionally. "Meanwhile, my beautiful and famous daughter, Elizabeth, put into her veins whatever drug she was on at the time and crept up to the top floor—to dream it had never happened. Are you listening, Miss Seton?"

"But Elizabeth wasn't here," gasped Maude, as her wits began to rally.

"Oh, yes, she was. *I* was the one who came in that cab. Philip phoned me from the hospital and told me what to do. Wear Elizabeth's mink that she had once given me. Wear one of her hats that she had given me. Go to Times Square. Hail a cab with Elizabeth's famous gestures. When I arrived here, he met me and put his arms around me, and whatever neighbors—oh, there were neighbors then—who had seen the ambulance and were curious—they took me for Elizabeth. So my daughter had her alibi."

Maude Seton gave up pretending for the moment that she was going to be murdered this afternoon. "Really?" she said feebly.

"Elizabeth was told that Barby didn't remember anything, and being what they call 'high,' she insisted on visiting the hospital. Philip had hoped to force her into a doctor's care, but she got away and went to the theater. He was detained, as he has said, although he was doing the best he could to watch her. So—Elizabeth disappeared."

Maude's brain was now buzzing. "Are you trying to say that—*that* is Elizabeth?"

The woman lifted one hand to demand silence as if, now that she had begun to tell, she could not bear an interruption. "Barby really didn't remember anything. We thought that if Elizabeth had gone running blindly to her death, then at least Barby would never need to know how she had come to be so cruelly hurt. And maybe her mother's legend wouldn't have to be destroyed. So we found the strength to wait."

The voice had steadied. "Thirteen days later Philip found her, doped, debauched, dirty, in some filthy room. He wanted me to dismiss all the servants except our Mrs. Pelham, who kept our secret until she died, God rest her loyal soul. And Philip brought Elizabeth home. With Dr. Carlson's help, with more agony for us all than you can ever imagine, we took Elizabeth off narcotics. When Barby was ready to leave the hospital, we sent her with Mrs. Pelham to Florida—for convalescence in the sun, we said. Then we put Barby in the very best schools we could find."

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"I still don't—"

"You see, Elizabeth wasn't—well, right. She was very confused. Some days she wouldn't believe that she had ever had a child."

"Why didn't you show her the child?" said Maude, who was feeling almost her normally bold self.

"Because we would have had to show the child her mother," the woman said quietly. "Of course, we had to account for Elizabeth somehow, so she became Mrs. Rose, and I became 'Mrs. Allen.' That meant I couldn't visit Barby or have Barby come here, since she would have recognized me. So it was Philip who watched over Barby. He went to all her little celebrations. Advised and comforted her. She has grown into a fine young woman. She has married well. She is happy." The woman's head was proud. "As for the two of us," she continued, "we kept on, sometimes hoping that one day Elizabeth would come back—come back to herself.

"Now it's over," the woman continued. "Will you help us, Miss Seton? Let us bury her quietly as Mrs. Rose. No one will pay much attention any more. Will you please not force us to tell Barby, now, what her mother had become and what her mother had done to her? Will you let the legend rest? It does no harm to anyone. Elizabeth really was, *once,* very beautiful and talented."

"You were a little foolish to let me see her, weren't you?" said Maude saucily.

"She liked to read about her own legend. She didn't really understand how much time had passed. She always supposed that next month, next fall, next spring, she would be beautiful again and go back to her former eminence. She could take pleasure in the skill she thought she had—to act the part of a sick old woman."

"I see," said Maude. "You just thought you'd fool *me*—just for the fun of it."

"Yes," the woman said calmly. "And *I* see. You still intend to tell the story."

"If I promise not to," said Maude, with belated caution, "then may I go?"

"Your promises are worthless," the woman said with quiet resignation. "I shouldn't have bothered. Just go, if you like." She was fumbling in the pocket of her dress. "I believe this is your property."

Maude got up and took the small weapon from that steady hand. She was settling her clothing, not to be seen on the street in such disarray, when Philip Mortmain appeared at the end of the passage. His eyes seemed dusty. He stepped aside politely.

"May I leave now?" Maude said.

"I don't know," he answered vaguely, not seeming to give his full attention to her, not really seeing her. "When the doctor comes . . ."

"I've told her and begged her," said the woman, "But it's no good, Philip."

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"No," He didn't even glance at Maude, but moved into the big room and sank into a chair. Maude flitted to the open passage. Up the three steps, and she would be safe. She had her weapon. She had her story. She must only pass between that—that heap on the floor—and the wall, then open the door. But *who* was dead? Maude hesitated.

The housekeeper had gone to the man. He said to her drearily, "We needn't worry about Barby, I suppose. She can understand it, now."

The woman said softly. "Yes, if she must. You have raised her well. And to Elizabeth, my dear, you have kept all your promises. 'In sickness or in health,' you said, 'until death do us part'."

Maude Seton, listening from the passage, thought, Oh Gawd! She was infuriated. How icky can you get? Did they still think she was going to fall for this junk? As if anybody took the mouthings in the marriage service for anything *but* mouthings! And a third husband, at that! How simple-minded did they think she was? If they were putting on this sickening act for *her* benefit—but *why*?

"I see," she said loudly. "You *want* me to tell the world that the old woman was Elizabeth Rose."

And that's pretty cute, she was raging to herself. Just fool Seton and you've got it made. Oh, wouldn't you like to bury Elizabeth Rose again, and publicly, *and somewhere else!* Oh, wouldn't you just!

"You know she is," the woman said coldly. "You heard."

"Philip, *darling*, eh?" Maude had begun to snarl. She hated Philip Mortmain with her whole being. She must hurt him! "Did the poor silly old thing sometimes have the delusion that she *was* her own adorable daughter? Being mad—about her daughter's charming husband, for instance?"

He stood up and came toward her. She held her gas gun ready. But she was not displeased to notice that he was seeing her now.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked quietly.

"What's bugging me?" she said flippantly. "You don't know, then, that she told me? 'My daughter is buried in the garden,' she said."

Then Maude's heart lurched as the woman moaned dismay.

Philip Mortmain said, with sudden force, "And you intend to tell *that* to the world?"

"Oh, when I am given an assignment," she said, "I do like to tell the whole story." She was being perfectly reckless and her heart was banging, but there was a savage joy in it, and suddenly the dusty look was gone from his eyes.

The doorbell rang and made her jump. But he just stood there, looking at her. "Her daughter was buried in the garden," he repeated slowly. Then he bowed slightly. "Why, yes, that is true. Excuse me."

He wasn't going to kill her. It seemed he wouldn't bother. He was

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merely going to answer the door. Maude put her back to the passage wall. She just stood there. Her brain seemed to have stopped.

It was a doctor who had come. She saw him crouch to throw back the tablecloth, and she saw Mortmain kneel. Yah! *Still* playing pious devotion to that—that scarecrow! What if the doctor's in the plot too?

The two men began at last to walk toward her. "Why the devil everything has to come out now," the doctor was saying crossly, "I can't see. Listen, Philip, Missing Persons have known exactly where Elizabeth was, and in what condition, for fifteen years now. And so has her manager. And her bank. Everything's been in order. Now, *why* does every lip-licking twerp in the city have to have this private tragedy dished up at breakfast? Keep on thinking about Barby, I say."

He stopped to stare at Maude. He was a rosy-fleshed, somewhat rotund, middle-aged man, and seemed almost ludicrously respectable. "Who is this?"

"This is Maude Seton," said Philip Mortmain coldly, "a journalist of some sort. She came here, uninvited, to accuse me of murder, to blind me with tear gas, to upset Elizabeth, to hear us call her name —"

"What the devil is it her business?"

"She says it's her business to tell the whole story."

"Is that so?" the doctor said angrily.

"I'm very sorry, Doctor," said Maude brightly, now that she had managed to slip along the wall and was between them and the way out. Whether the doctor was a dupe or not, let him look after himself.

"Just a minute," said Philip Mortmain, "Are you going to tell the *whole* story?"

"Philip?" The doctor sounded worried.

"Then you'll tell," Mortmain went on, "that when Elizabeth accidentally knocked her small daughter over the railing, she thought she had killed her. You must also tell how Elizabeth had nearly finished burying the living child when I came on the scene and pulled the unconscious little girl out of the earth just in time."

The doctor said angrily, "Damn it, Philip, why did you have to bring up that gruesome bit? Elizabeth was mad as a hatter, half her brain eaten away, but you could have spared Barby that part of it."

"No," said Philip, "the world must have the *whole* story. You do understand? I put Miss Seton in the garden because I couldn't talk to her until I'd soothed Elizabeth. She climbed up to the balcony. Don't you see what happened?"

He turned. "Tell it all," he said, "or, I promise you, *I will.*"

He went into the sitting room and pulled the draperies closed. He sat down in the gloom, far away.

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The doctor was looking at Maude in a curious way. "Well, well," he murmured. "Seton is the name? Miss Maude Seton? I must phone the authorities."

"Wait," she said. "Listen."

"You *will* be a bit of a freak, won't you?" This doctor wasn't ludicrous any more, but a shrewd citizen of Maude's own country. "Climbing up the back of a man's house? Why? Carried away by melodramatic fancies? Or in a fit of paranoia?"

Maude was a moth against the wall and the pins were going in. "Please, if you all think it's better—"

"Too late," the doctor said cheerfully. "What Philip Mortmain promises to do, he will do. Don't think he won't. An unusual man, eh?"

She whimpered; he was too shrewd for her.

Then the doctor touched her, benignly enough, just pushing her a little. "Could be, you don't yet realize what happened? What part *you* played?" Then he left her and went off to the kitchen phone.

So Maude Seton looked into the mirror on the wall and realized there was also a mirror in that bedroom upstairs. Then she saw what had sent Elizabeth Rose at last to her death. A white female face, rising so slowly and so silently from out of the garden, all streaked and smudged with the black earth—just come from her grave.

No! But no use crying "no." Seton knew that she was destroyed. A temporary tidbit at the bars and after that, a fool forever. Who in the world would pity the *whole* story? Pity these hands that had grubbed in a flower pot, frantic to escape—

On guard! On guard! Lest anything as uncomfortable as sun or rain or love or faithfulness or sacrifice should fall upon Maude Seton and she should grow!

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a *NEW* crime short-short by
ANDREW GARVE
first publication in the United States

Granger had no practical alternative, no choice. He had to pay, or lose everything—his wealth, his position, his wife. Yes, he had to pay all right . . .

A CASE OF BLACKMAIL

by ANDREW GARVE

OLSEN CLIMBED THE LAST FEW yards of the chalk slope and emerged on the downland summit. The hill was called the Ring, because of the circular copse of trees that crowned it. He walked once around the copse. As he'd expected, he had the place to himself on this weekday in late October.

He looked down. In every direction the sides of the hill fell away steeply to the valley, six hundred feet below. He had an airman's view of the approaches. Through his binoculars he could study everything that moved. Surprise was impossible. He'd chosen well.

He checked the time. A quarter past two. Forty-five minutes to go. In forty-five minutes he'd be richer by £20,000 in used banknotes.

He took the newspaper clipping from his pocket and had another look at it. It was from a financial paper that he'd picked up while he was waiting to see his bank manager. It read: "Mr. Eric Stokes, whose success in building up British Fireworks, Ltd. has been one of the outstanding market features of the year, yesterday made an offer for Agar Munitions, Ltd. At the offered price of 18/3, shareholders of Agar would be well advised to accept."

Accompanying the text was a photograph of Eric Stokes. And the face was the face of Granger.

Olsen was sure of it. Admittedly, it was nearly twenty years since he'd shared a prison cell with Granger in Valparaiso. And men changed a great deal in twenty years. But there was a look about the eyes that had instantly caught Olsen's attention. That, and the formidable nose.

Everything else was different—the hair style, the silvery sideburns, the mustache, the plumpness. But, basically, it was still Granger—Granger grown rich and legitimate,

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the owner of flourishing companies, built up, no doubt, on the proceeds of the safecracking job he'd been jailed for. Some crooks never managed to cash in after escaping from jail; but Granger obviously had escaped to good purpose.

Olsen, reconnoitering, had seen Granger's splendid home near Regent's Park, his shining Rolls-Royce, his lovely young wife. Yes, Granger had done well for himself. He'd always said he would. A tough character, Granger, tough and clever. An artist at safecracking—that South American safe had been perfectly blown. But a man with brains, too . . .

Olsen put the clipping back in his pocket, quite satisfied—it was Granger all right. True, the fellow had given nothing away when Olsen, disguising his voice, had made the anonymous phone call. He'd said almost nothing when Olsen had asked for £20,000 as the price of his silence, and had then given his instructions. Granger had just listened. But he'd taken everything in—no doubt about that. He'd got the message.

So he'd bring the money. He'd bring it because he hadn't any practical alternative . . . Of course, he could change his name again and disappear a second time. But that way he'd lose everything, his wealth, his status, and probably his young wife as well. No, he'd prefer to pay. Anyone in his position would.

Olsen frowned. The trouble was, he couldn't actually *see* Granger paying up. Granger knew as much about crooks as anyone. Granger knew—he must know—that a blackmailer never stops at a first payment. The demands would go on. It was hard to see a man as tough and ruthless as Granger being prepared to pay and pay and pay. To be bled white . . . All the same, paying was his only hope. He had no choice.

Olsen gazed down the hill. Some men would have confided in the police and joined in setting a trap to catch the blackmailer—but Granger wouldn't dare to do that. He wouldn't dare to have Olsen caught, because Olsen would then tell the police that Granger still had fifteen years to serve in Valparaiso, and the police would have to act.

No, Granger couldn't afford to bring the police in—not with his record. He'd have to see it through alone . . .

Olsen looked at his watch again. Nearly a quarter to three. If Granger was coming, there should be some sign of him soon. Olsen scanned the valley through his glasses. A few cows in the pastures, a few sheep on the cropped hillside, a tractor at work in a distant field. A few cars, small as toys, passing along the white ribbon of road—

Suddenly Olsen paused in his sweep. A big gray car had pulled up at the foot of the slope. This could be it. It looked like a Rolls. The driver was getting out. He was

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taking an attaché case from the car. He was locking the car. Now he was starting to breast the hill.

Olsen's spirits rose. He'd made no mistake. Through the glasses he could see it was the man in the photograph—silver-haired, mustached. Stokes alias Granger. And there was no one else. No police. Everything was going according to plan.

As the tubby figure climbed, Olsen moved into the shadow of the copse and lay down, watching. He had a blackjack for use in an emergency—but he didn't expect any trouble. Granger would have no reason to suppose that anyone would be there now—blackmailers didn't usually collect till after dark. The chances were he'd carry out his instructions to the letter——conceal the attaché case under a solitary thorn bush at the edge of the knoll, then go straight down the hill again. Twenty thousand quid poorer. And Olsen would pick up the case and descend the hill on the other side to his own car. Simple . . .

Only a few minutes more. Olsen could see Granger well up the slope, climbing the last short pitch, coming out on the grassy hilltop. Looking hot and worried, which wasn't surprising. Much fatter. Too much good living. Odd, Olsen thought, to see an old Valparaiso cellmate on a Sussex downland hill after twenty years.

Yes, Granger was carrying out his instructions. A beaten man, Olsen would have said. Hardly a glance to right or left. Attaché case pushed well down under the bush, as directed. Then a quick about-turn, and back the way he'd come.

Olsen waited, his heart beating fast. Twenty thousand lovely quid in used notes! Years of safe, idle luxury ahead—and more to come later.

He watched Granger descend to his car. He watched him get into the car. He watched him drive away. He looked around the valley. Not a movement anywhere. Hardly a sign of life. No danger from anyone. The plan had worked perfectly.

He almost ran to the attaché case. Just one thing to make sure of—that the notes were used and of different denominations and perfectly safe to handle.

He bent over the case, his fingers trembling at the fastening. He raised the lid.

He had just time to register that the attaché case contained no notes —only wires, and some familiar gray sticks. Then the explosion blew him to bits.

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27th Anniversary Special

a detective *SHORT NOVEL* by

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

"The Jeweled Butterfly" is perhaps Erle Stanley Gardner's least known short novel—but, paradoxically, it is one of his best. And as with all of Mr. Gardner's stories you'll find it races with jet speed . . .

This is a short novel of the purest detection. The protagonist is not Erle Stanley Gardner's most famous sleuth, Perry Mason, or even one of his lesser creations—Sheriff Bill Eldon or D.A. Selby or (as by A. A. Fair) Donald Lam. No, the detective in "The Jeweled Butterfly" is, so far as we know, a one-time performer, not a series character; but there is something unusual—the detective is a woman! . . . So, meet Peggy Castle, secretary to Old E.B., head of an insurance company, and more important, gossip columnist ("Castle's in the Air") for the company's house organ—and she is a born snoop!

Peggy gets herself deeply involved in The Case of "Miss Cleavage"—which turns out, in Peggy's own words, to be a "carefully planned, cold-blooded, deliberate murder, cunningly conceived and ruthlessly carried out." In fact, Peggy gets herself so deeply involved that she becomes Suspect Number Two.

It is only fair to add (in justice to the male of the species) that Peggy is aided and abetted by her Great-uncle Benedict, a likable old rapscallion and a former con man who, if he'd put his quicksilver mind to it, would make a first-rate detective himself. But this case belongs to Miss Peggy Castle, surely one of Erle Stanley Gardner's most appealing characters . . .

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THE JEWELED BUTTERFLY

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

THERE WAS AN OFFICE RUMOR THAT Old E.B. locked the door of his private office on Wednesday mornings so he could practice putting. This had never been confirmed, but veteran employees at the Warranty Exchange & Fidelity Indemnity, known locally as WEFI, made it a rule either to take up important matters on Tuesday or to postpone them until Thursday.

Peggy Castle, E.B.'s secretary, didn't inherit the Wednesday breathing spell from her predecessors. When Old E.B. found out that before coming to work for WEFI, Peggy had worked on a country newspaper upstate he inveigled her into starting a gossip column in the WEFI house organ.

Peggy was interested in people, had a photographic memory for names and faces, and a broadminded, whimsical sense of humor. The result was that her column, which she called *Castle's in the Air,* attracted so much attention that Old E.B., beaming with pride, insisted she devote more and more time to it.

"It's just what we've needed," he said. "We've had too much money to spend on the damn paper. We made it too slick, too formal, too dressed up. It looks impressive, but who the hell wants a house organ to be impressive? We want it to be neighborly. We want it to be interesting. We want the employees to eat it up. We want something that'll attract customer attention on the outside. You're doing it. It's fine. Keep it up. One of these days it'll lead to something big."

Old E.B. carried a bunch of clippings from Peggy's column in his wallet. Very often he'd pick out priceless gems and sidle up to cronies at the club. "Got a girl up at the office—my secretary, smart as a whip," he'd begin. "You ought to see what she's done to the gossip column in our house organ. This is it. *Castle's in the Air.* Listen to this one:

" 'The identity of the practical joker in the Bond Writing Department has not as yet been discovered. When Bill Fillmore finds him he insists he's going to choke him until his eyeballs protrude far enough to be tattooed with Bill's initials. It seems that Bill and Ernestine have been keeping pretty steady company. At noon last Thursday, Bill decided to pop the question, did so, and was accepted. That afternoon he was walking on air. However, it seems that Bill had confided his intentions to a few friends, showing them the ring he had bought to slip on Ernestine's finger if she said yes. So some wag managed to dust the knees of Bill's trousers immediately

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after lunch. Bill doesn't know how it was done. He didn't even know it had been done. While Ernestine was telling the news and showing her sparkler, observant eyes were naturally looking Bill over. People couldn't refrain from seeing the two well-defined dust spots on the knees of Bill's trousers. Ernestine thought it was cute, but Bill— Well, let's talk about something else.'

"How's that for a yarn?" E.B. would say, slapping his crony on the back. "Damnedest thing you ever heard? You can figure what that's done to the house organ. Everybody reads it now. Stuff like that really peps it up.

"How's that? Hell, no! Not a word of truth to it, but the funny thing is that Bill Fillmore doesn't know it. He really thinks there *was* dust on his trousers, put there by some wag, and he's going around chewing tenpenny nails. Half of the people in the place are in on the secret, and the other half are looking for the practical joker. Damnedest thing you ever saw, the way stuff like that peps up the house organ. Here's more of it."

Given the slightest provocation, Old E.B. would pull out more clippings. Usually his cronies gave him the provocation. The clippings were always good for a laugh, and many of E.B.'s friends had house-organ problems of their own.

On this Wednesday afternoon, Peggy opened the anonymous letter and read it through carefully.

Don Kimberly is having a date tonight at the Royal Pheasant with Miss Cleavage. Is this going to burn somebody up! I don't ask you to take my word for it, so I won't sign my name. Just stick around and see what happens.

The missive was signed *A Reader,* and the writing was feminine.

Ordinarily she would have consigned this sort of thing to the wastebasket after only a cursory glance, but Don Kimberly, trouble shooter in the Claims Adjusting Department, was the most eligible catch in the organization. A young, clear-headed bachelor with a legal education, he had dark, wavy hair, steady, slate-colored eyes, bronzed skin, and a rather mysterious air of reserve. Every girl in the organization got cardiac symptoms when he walked by her desk—and Peggy was no exception.

"Miss Cleavage" was Stella Lynn, who had won a beauty contest at a county fair before coming to the city to work for WEFI. It was obvious that the judges of this local show had been more interested in well-developed curves than in streamlined contours.

Stella Lynn, proud of her curvaceous contours, habitually wore the most plunging necklines of any employee in the WEFI organization. When someone came up with the nickname of "Miss Cleavage," the appellation had fit as snugly as the office dresses she wore and had stuck like chewing gum.

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Peggy Castle studied the anonymous letter again.

What in the world could Don Kimberly see in Stella Lynn? The whole thing was ridiculous enough, so that it *could* have been a gag sent to her by some practical joker who hoped she would publish it in her column without confirmation and so create a minor office furor.

On the other hand, suppose the thing actually was true? It would cause plenty of commotion.

Without stopping to think that this was exactly what the writer of the anonymous letter had planned, Peggy decided to find out at first-hand . . .

The Royal Pheasant night club catered to a regular clientele. The floor show was spotty, the food quite good, the music fair. The dance floor was a little larger than the handkerchief-sized squares in some of the more expensive night clubs.

Peggy, using her press card to forestall any rule about unescorted women guests, sallied into the Royal Pheasant attired in her best semi-formal, secured a table, and toyed with a cocktail, waiting.

Half an hour passed uneventfully. The headwaiter dropped by. "Another cocktail, Miss Castle?"

She started slightly at his use of her name and then, remembering the press card, smiled and shook her head.

"We want you to be happy," the headwaiter went on, "and we hope you can write something nice about the place."

Peggy felt a twinge of conscience. Perhaps the management thought she was with some magazine of large circulation.

"As a matter of fact," he went on, "I read your column every single issue."

"*You* do?" she asked, surprised.

"E.B. Halsey told me about your column," the headwaiter went on. "He comes in here quite often. He put me on the mailing list. It's nice stuff."

Peggy felt a surge of relief. "Oh. I'm so glad—so glad you like it."

"We get quite a bit of business from the big brass out at your company," he went on. "We're really pleased that you're here. And, of course, you'll be entitled to all the courtesies."

"All the courtesies?" she repeated.

"The tab is on the house," he explained. "Another cocktail?"

"No, thanks, not right now."

"We have a nice show tonight. Glad you're here."

He moved away, taking with him a load of guilt from Peggy's shoulders and leaving her with a queer feeling of exultation.

Then Don Kimberly came in—alone.

Quite evidently he had a table reserved. He seated himself, looked leisurely around him, ordered a cocktail, and settled back with the air of a man who has arrived early for an appointment.

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Peggy glanced at her wrist watch. It was 9:15. The floor show started at 9:30.

Peggy Castle puckered her forehead. It was bizarre enough in the first place to think of Don Kimberly taking Stella Lynn to the Royal Pheasant. But he certainly wasn't expecting Miss Cleavage to come in unescorted and join him. There was something strange about the whole business. If it had been a date he'd have called for Stella and escorted her.

Peggy became so immersed in her thoughts that she didn't realize the passing of time until the lights dimmed and her waiter was there with another cocktail.

"Beg pardon, Miss Castle, but the management knows another one won't hurt you, and you'll be wanting to watch the floor show now."

Peggy thanked him. The chorus came dancing on, undraped almost to the point of illegality. A master of ceremonies pulled up the microphone.

Peggy glanced at Don Kimberly. Kimberly wasn't watching the girls' legs. He was frowningly contemplating his wrist watch.

Good heavens, Peggy Castle thought, she wouldn't stand him up. She wouldn't *dare*. Why, this is the highlight of her career. If she actually has a date with him she—no, no, she couldn't be late.

But quite obviously, whoever Don Kimberly was waiting for *was* late, and the increasing shortness of the intervals at which he consulted his watch and then gave frowning attention to the door indicated a rapidly growing impatience.

And then the lights came on, and suddenly Peggy realized that Don Kimberly was looking at her with a puzzled expression of "where-the-devil-have-I-seen-that-girl-before" in his eyes.

She nodded and smiled, and as he bowed she saw sudden recognition flash in his face. Then he was on his way over.

"Well, hello, Miss Castle," he said. "I didn't recognize you for a moment. Waiting for someone?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I'm getting material for my column, covering a nitery where so many of the WEFI officials drop in. I trust you realize that the eyes of the press are upon you, Mr. Kimberly, and that the pitiless white light of publicity will be turned on you in my next—"

"Oh, good heavens!" Kimberly exclaimed in dismay, and, without asking her permission, sat down at her table and scowled at her.

"Why, what's the matter?" Peggy asked vivaciously. "Surely *you* have nothing to conceal. You're unmarried, unencumbered. I—was on the point of adding uninhibited."

"Uninhibited is right," he groaned.

"And may I ask why being written up in *Castle's in the Air* seems to provoke so little enthusiasm in you?"

"Am I unenthusiastic?"

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"I thought you were."

He smiled, quite evidently having regained his composure. "I'm enthusiastic now, but it's certainly not because of your column."

"Surely *you* aren't alone?" she asked archly, carefully surveying his face.

"I'm waiting for some folks. Why not quit playing with that cocktail and let me order you another?"

"Good heavens, this is my second."

"Well, at the rate you're working on that one, the first must have been at least an hour ago. Here! Waiter!"

Peggy let him have his way. She was experiencing a pleasant glow, not only from the drinks, but from the exciting realization that there must be more to this than appeared on the surface.

Why had Don Kimberly made this surreptitious rendezvous with Stella Lynn? Had he been ashamed to go to her apartment and escort her to the Royal Pheasant—or had he been afraid to?

Once more Kimberly glanced at his wrist watch.

"My, you're jittery," Peggy said. "Like a nervous cat. You aren't by any chance being stood up, are you? No, that's catty! After all, you know, I'm on the lookout for news."

She felt certain he winced inwardly. "A news story," he said, "has been defined as being the thing the other person doesn't want published. I believe there was some famous newspaperman who said, 'If the parties want it published, it's not news. If they try to keep it out of the paper, then it's news.'"

"And are you going to try to keep something out of the paper?" she asked.

Abruptly he was serious. "Yes, I'm afraid I'm going to deprive you of a choice item for your column—even if I have to go direct to E.B. Halsey to do it."

"The date you have here tonight?"

He regarded her with frowning appraisal. "Now, wait a minute, Miss Castle. Why are *you* here?"

She met his eyes. "I received an anonymous tip that you and Stella Lynn were going to be here tonight. I thought I'd drop in, cover the night club, and pick up a 'personal' that would be—well, interesting—to a lot of people at the office."

"You mean amusing?"

"Well, if we're going to be technical about it, amusement is a form of interest."

Kimberly was thoughtful. "You've doubtless heard the nickname 'Miss Cleavage,'" he said at length.

Peggy started to laugh, and then at something in his tone caught herself.

"I've known her for five years," Kimberly went on, "—knew her before she came to work here, knew her before she won that beauty contest. She's a good kid."

"I'm sorry," Peggy said. "I—"

"You don't need to be. I understand. She—I don't know, I guess

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she's an exhibitionist. She has that complex. Just as some people like to sing, Stella likes to show her curves. She's proud of them. But she's a *good* kid."

Peggy said, "I didn't realize that there was anything serious, that—"

"There isn't."

"I know, but what I'm trying to say is that I don't think there's anyone in the company who realizes that you've known her so long. You are, of course—well, eligible. I guess everybody likes Stella, but people wouldn't expect you two to be having a date."

Abruptly he said, "I like her, but this isn't a date, and I'm worried."

"What do you mean?"

He said, "As you probably know, my job is pretty diversified. If an actress reports she's lost fifty thousand dollars' worth of jewels, or claims that someone got into her apartment and stole a hundred-thousand-dollar necklace, it's up to me to investigate. I handle the burglary-insurance division of WEFI, and that ties in with a lot of things."

She nodded, her senses alert.

"Stella called me on the telephone this morning. To appreciate the significance of that you must realize that Stella has always had an exaggerated idea of the importance of my position. This is, I think, the first time she ever called me, and she called me during office hours."

Kimberly paused and glanced searchingly at Peggy. Peggy kept her face expressionless.

"Well," he went on, "she told me that she had to see me tonight on a terribly important matter. She asked me where we could meet. I said I'd be glad to see her at any time or place, and she said it must be some place where the meeting would seem to be accidental. So I suggested the Royal Pheasant. She said this would be all right, and that she'd be here at nine thirty on the dot."

"She was to meet you here?"

"Yes. I offered to call for her at her apartment. She said I mustn't go near her place, that she was in a ticklish situation, and that I should meet her here. If she was with someone I was to pretend it was an accidental meeting. She promised to be here by nine thirty sharp. I'm worried. She's never late."

"I didn't know, and I guess no one else did, that you were friends."

"There's no particular secret about it. Stella thought it would be better if we didn't proclaim it from the housetops. You see, she may be an exhibitionist, but she has a delicately adjusted sense of values, and she'll never let a friend down. She's a good kid. She's oversensitive about the difference in our positions at the place."

"I take it you got her the job?"

"No, I didn't. I don't know who did. I ran into her in the elevator one afternoon. She told me she had been working there for two weeks. I offered to buy her a drink. She told me she realized I was up in the high

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brass and she was only in the filing department. She said she wanted me to know she'd never embarrass me.

"It's things like that about Stella that make you like her. She's so natural, always so perfectly frank and easy. Look here, Miss Castle, I'm worried about her. I'm going up to her apartment and make sure she's all right. It might be a good thing if you came along."

"Perhaps she's just late and—"

"Not Stella. She'd have phoned if she'd been detained. Waiter, let's have a check, please."

Peggy didn't tell him she had had no dinner. She merely nodded and gave him a smile she hoped was reassuring. "I'll be glad to go with you," she said, "but I thought Stella told you that you mustn't go to her apartment."

"That's right, but I think that with you with me it'll be all right. We'll say you and I had a date for tonight —that we're together. And anything you may find out isn't for publication. Come on, let's go."

The apartment house was ornate in front, but rather shabby after one had passed the foyer. Almost mechanically Don Kimberly fitted a key to the front door, opened it, escorted Peggy through the foyer, back to the automatic elevator, and punched the button for the fifth floor.

"You have—a key?" she asked.

"Don't be silly. That's the key to my own apartment house. Almost any key will fit these outer doors."

Peggy knew that was so, knew also that Don Kimberly hadn't so much as hesitated or tentatively tried his key. He had fitted it to the lock, turned it with complete assurance, and gone on in without pausing.

She found herself wondering whether this was the first time he had tried his own key in that lock. The fact that she hated herself for having the thought didn't erase it from her mind.

Then the rattling elevator came to a stop. Kimberly held the door open for her and slid the steel door of the elevator shut behind him. "Down to your left," he said. "Five nineteen."

She turned left, and Kimberly, catching up with her, pushed the bell button of Apartment 519.

They could hear the sound of the buzzer, but no sound of motion.

Kimberly waited a few moments, then tried the door. The knob turned, the door opened, and Peggy, looking in, saw a well-ordered, plainly furnished apartment.

"Anybody home?" Kimberly called.

Peggy clutched his arm.

"What is it?" he asked.

"That coat over the chair."

"What about it?"

"It's a coat she'd have worn going out for the evening. Why would she have left it here?"

She pointed to a swinging door that evidently led to a kitchen. Her voice sounded high-pitched with ex-

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citement. "Let's make sure she isn't here."

Kimberly pushed back the swinging door. Peggy, who was standing where she could see through the half-open door, gave an exclamation of dismay.

The stockinged legs of a girl were sprawled out on the floor. A bottle of whiskey was on the side of the sink. A glass had rolled from the girl's limp fingers, leaving a trail of liquid along the linoleum as it rolled. The figure was attired in a strapless bra, a voluminous petticoat, shoes, and stockings.

Kimberly suddenly laughed and called, "Stella, come on, wake up! You've missed the boat!"

The woman didn't move.

Peggy, moving forward, noticed the peculiar color of the girl's skin. She dropped swiftly to her knees, picked up the limp hand, and suddenly dropped it. "She's dead."

"What!"

"Dead. It must have been her heart."

Kimberly said, "Call a doctor."

Peggy said, "A doctor won't help. She's dead. Just touch her, and you'll know she's dead. We'd better . . ."

"Better what?"

"Better call the police."

Kimberly hesitated. "What's that on her leg?"

Peggy looked at the girl's right leg. Attached to the reinforced top of the sheer nylon stocking was a beautiful butterfly pin with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds giving a splash of glittering color.

"Good heavens," Kimberly exclaimed, "how in the world did she get *that*?"

"Why, what about it?" Peggy asked, realizing that Kimberly's face had turned white.

"Ever hear of the Garrison jewel theft?" he asked.

"Who hasn't?"

"Our company insured the Garrison jewels. We're stuck to the tune of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars—and that butterfly looks exactly like the famous Garrison butterfly. Now, how in the world did Stella get that?"

Peggy unfastened the butterfly pin and dropped it into her purse. "It won't do any good to have the police find that," she said.

"Look here," Kimberly protested. "You can't do that. It may be evidence."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. I only know you can't do that."

"I've already done it."

"But—look here, let's call a doctor and—we don't need to wait. Let the doctor do whatever's necessary."

Peggy said, "It's a job for the police. Do you notice that froth on her lips? And there's an odor that I have been trying to place. Now I know what it is."

"What do you mean, an odor?"

"An odor. Bitter almonds. That means cyanide. So does the color of the skin."

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He looked at her dubiously. "You seem to know a lot about—suicides."

"I do," Peggy said. "I've done newspaper work. Now since we're already in it this deep, let's take a look around."

"What for?"

"To protect ourselves. Let's make certain there are no more corpses, for one thing."

She moved swiftly about the apartment, her quick eyes drinking in details.

"If this is suicide what you're doing is probably highly illegal," he said.

"And if it's murder?"

"Then it's doubly illegal."

She said nothing, moving quietly around the rooms. Her gloved hands occasionally touched some object with the greatest care, but for the most part her hands were at her sides.

There was an odor of raw whiskey about the place, perhaps from the spilled drink in the kitchen. However, this odor was stronger in the bathroom.

Peggy dropped to her knees on the tiled floor, picked up a small sliver of glass, then another. She let both slivers drop back to the tiles.

In the bedroom, the dress Stella was to have worn was spread out on the bed. The plunging neckline seemed to go nearly to the waist.

Kimberly, looking at the V-shaped opening in the front of the dress, gave a low whistle. "Peggy," he said at length, using her first name easily and naturally, "this is going to make a stink. If it *should* be murder—I don't see how it *could* be, and yet that's what I'm afraid of."

"Suppose it's suicide?" she asked.

"Then there wouldn't be too much to it—just a few lines on page two, or perhaps a write-up in the second section. And Old E.B. hates bad publicity."

"Are *you* telling *me*?"

"Well, then," he said, "do you think we really have to notify the police? Can't we just call a doctor and leave?"

"Do you want to be Suspect Number One in a murder case?" she asked.

"Heavens, no!"

"You're filing nomination papers right now with that sort of talk. There's the phone. Call the police."

He hesitated. "I'd like to keep us out of it altogether. Since she's dead there's nothing we can do—"

Peggy walked to the phone, dialed the operator, asked for police headquarters, and almost immediately heard a booming masculine voice answer the phone.

Peggy said, "My name is Castle. I wish to report a death. We just found a body under very odd circumstances and—"

"Where are you?"

Peggy gave him the address.

"Wait there," the voice said. "Don't touch anything. Be on the lookout for a squad car. I'll get in touch with the dispatcher."

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The two officers were very considerate. They listened to the sketchy story Kimberly told, the story that very carefully left out all reference to Peggy's suspicion of poison, and recounted barely the facts that Stella Lynn was a "friend of theirs," that they had called on her at her apartment, had found the door open, walked in, and discovered her body on the floor; they didn't know exactly what the proper procedure was under the circumstances, but felt they should notify the police.

The police looked around a bit, nodded sagely, and then one of them called the Coroner.

Peggy ventured with some hesitation, "Are you—have you any ideas of what caused death?"

"You thinking of suicide?"

She hesitated. "I can't help wondering whether it might have been her heart."

"Had she been despondent or anything?"

"I didn't know her that well," Peggy said, "but I gather she had rather a happy disposition. But—well, notice the foam on the lips, the peculiar color of her skin, and —"

The officer shrugged. "We aren't thinking, not right now. We're following rules and taking statements."

There followed an interval of waiting. Men came and went, and eventually the Homicide Squad arrived with a photographer to take pictures of the body, and a detective to question Peggy and Kimberly in detail.

Kimberly told his story first. Since it did not occur to anyone to examine them separately, Peggy, after hearing Don's highly generalized version of the evening's activities, confined herself to the bare essentials. The officers seemed to take it for granted that she had been Don Kimberly's date, and that following dinner they had dropped in at Stella Lynn's apartment simply because they were friends and because Stella Lynn worked in the same office.

Don Kimberly drove her home. Peggy hoped he would open up with some additional explanation, but he was completely preoccupied with his thoughts and the problem of driving through the evening traffic, so it became necessary for Peggy to bring up the subject.

"You told your story first," she said, "so I had to back your play, but I think we've carried it far enough."

"What do you mean?"

"The police assumed I was your date for the evening."

"Well, what's wrong with that? We can't help what they assume."

"Then I'll draw you a diagram," Peggy said impatiently. "*I* think Stella Lynn was murdered. *I* think it was carefully planned, cold-blooded, deliberate murder, cunningly conceived and ruthlessly carried out. *I* think the police are going to investigate enough to find that out.

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Then they're going to ask *you* to tell *your* story in greater detail."

He slowed the car until it was barely crawling along. "All right," he said, "what's wrong with my story? You and I were at the Royal Pheasant. We got to talking about Stella Lynn. We decided to run in and see her. We—"

"Everything is wrong with that story," she interrupted. "In the first place, someone knew you were going to the Royal Pheasant to meet Stella. That someone sent me an anonymous letter. Moreover, if the police check with the headwaiter, they'll learn that I came in alone, using my press card, and that you came in later."

Abruptly he swung the car to the side of the road, parked at the curb, and shut off the motor. "What time did you get that anonymous letter?"

"In the afternoon mail."

"What became of it?"

"I tore it into small bits and dumped it into the wastebasket."

He said, "Stella didn't work today. She rang up and told the personnel manger she wouldn't be at the office. About ten thirty she rang me up and asked me what our policy would be on paying out a reward for the recovery of all of the gems in the Garrison job."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her it made a great deal of difference with whom we were dealing. You know how those things are. It's our policy never to reward a thief. If we did, we'd be in the position of fencing property that had first been stolen from our own clients. But if a man gives us a legitimate tip, and that tip leads to the recovery of insured property, we are, of course, willing to pay, and pay generously."

"You told her that?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She told me she thought she had some information on the Garrison case that would interest me. I told her that on a big job like that hundreds of false leads were floating around. She told me that she could show me evidence that would prove she was dealing with people who knew what they were talking about."

"That," Peggy said, "would account for the jeweled butterfly."

"You mean that was to be my assurance I was dealing with the right people?"

"That was the start of it, but I think it has an added significance now."

"What?"

"You are thinking Stella ran into danger because she was going to tell you something about the Garrison jewels. Now, let's suppose you are right, and she was killed by the jewel thieves. They'd never have left that jeweled butterfly on her stocking. All those rubies, emeralds, and diamonds! It must be worth a small fortune."

He thought that over.

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"And," Peggy went on, "if she'd been killed by an intruder or a burglar he'd naturally have taken the butterfly. So it adds up to the fact that her death must have been unrelated to that Garrison job and must have been caused by someone who was so anxious to have her out of the way the opportunity to steal the butterfly meant nothing."

He looked at her with sudden respect. "Say, you're a logical little cuss."

She said, "That's not what women want. When men praise their brains it's almost a slam. A woman would far rather be known as a glamor puss than as a thinker. Let's check on our story a little further. Stella telephoned you this morning, and it was you who suggested the Royal Pheasant?"

"That's right. Surely *you* don't doubt my statement."

"I don't doubt your statement. I doubt your conclusions."

"What do you mean?"

"If you told me that two and three added up to ten," she said, "I wouldn't be doubting your statement, I'd be doubting your conclusions. You might actually have ten as an answer, and know that the figures you had in mind consisted of two and three, but the total of those figures wouldn't be ten."

"Apparently you want to point out that there's a factor I've missed somewhere, that there's an extra five I don't know anything about."

"Exactly," she said.

"And what makes you think there's this extra five? What have I missed?"

"The anonymous letter I received in the afternoon mail had been postmarked at five thirty P.M. *yesterday*. If *you* are the one who suggested the Royal Pheasant, how did someone know yesterday that you and Stella were to have a date there tonight?"

"All right, let's go," he told her. "There's a possibility the janitor hasn't cleaned up in your office. We're going to have to find that letter, put the torn pieces together, and reconstruct the postmark on that envelope. There's also the possibility that your totals are all wrong and the postmark was a clever forgery. How come you noticed it?"

"Because Uncle Benedict told me if you ever wanted to get anywhere you had to notice details."

"Who's Uncle Benedict?"

"He's the black sheep of my family, the one who made his living by—" Abruptly she became silent. She realized all too keenly that she couldn't tell Don Kimberly about her Uncle Benedict. There were only a few people she *could* tell about him.

Kimberly signed both names to the register and said to the janitor, "Let's go up to E.B. Halsey's office, please, and make it snappy. Do you know whether that office has been cleaned?"

"Sure it has. We begin on that

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floor. That's the brass-hat floor. They're always out by five o'clock. Some of the other floors are later—"

"And you're certain Halsey's office has been cleaned up?"

"Sure. I did it myself."

"You emptied the wastebasket?"

"Yes."

"All right, we have to get that stuff. There was something in the wastebasket. Where is it now?"

The man grinned as he brought the elevator to a stop. "The stuff that was in that wastebasket is smoke by this time."

"You incinerated it?"

"Sure."

"I thought you sometimes saved it for a central pickup."

"No more, we don't. We burn it up. Everything in the wastebaskets is burned right here in the building. That's E.B. Halsey's orders. Don't let anything go out."

They hurried to E.B. Halsey's office. As the janitor had told them, it had been cleaned. The square, mahogany-colored wastebasket in Peggy Castle's secretarial office was completely free of paper. There was a folded square of cardboard in the bottom, and Peggy pulled it out in the vain hope that some fragment of the letter might have worked down beneath it.

There was nothing.

"I guess that's it," Kimberly said.

"Wait a minute," she told him. "I have a hunch. The way that janitor looked when he said the papers had been burned— Come on."

The janitor evidently had been expecting their ring because he brought the cage up quickly.

"All done?" he asked.

"Not quite," Peggy said. "We want to go down to the basement. I want to see where you burn those papers."

"It's just an ordinary incinerator. Mr. Halsey said that he wanted all papers burned on the premises, and—"

"I'm checking," Peggy said. "It's something important. I think Mr. Halsey will want a report tomorrow."

"Oh."

The janitor dropped the cage to the basement and said, "Right over to the left."

Peggy all but ran down the passageway to where several big clothesbaskets were stacked in front of an incinerator. Two of the clothesbaskets were almost full.

"What's this?"

"Scraps that we haven't burned yet."

"I thought you told me everything had been burned."

"Well, everything from your office."

"How do you know what office these came from?"

The man fidgeted uncomfortably. "Well, I *think* that these two came from the lower floors."

Peggy nodded to Kimberly, then upset the entire contents of the baskets on the floor, and started pawing through them, throwing to one

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side the envelopes, circular letters, newspapers, scratch paper—all the odds and ends that accumulate in a busy office during a day.

"We don't need to look through anything that isn't torn," she said to Kimberly. "I tore this letter up into fine pieces. And you don't need to bother with anything that's typewritten. This was written in ink in longhand."

They tossed the larger pieces back into the clothesbaskets. When they had sifted the whole thing down to the smaller pieces, Peggy suddenly gave a triumphant exclamation. "This is part of it," she said, holding up a triangular section of paper.

"Then here's another part," Kimberly said.

"And here's another." She pounced on another piece.

Kimberly found a fourth. "This piece has part of the postmark on it," he said, fitting it together with the other pieces. "Gosh, you were right. It's postmarked yesterday at five thirty. I tell you no one knew—"

Peggy caught his eye, glanced significantly at the janitor, who was watching them with an expression of puzzled speculation.

Kimberly nodded, and thereafter devoted his energies entirely to the search.

At last they were finished with the last scrap of paper on the floor. By this time they had recovered four pieces of the envelope and six pieces of the letter.

"I guess that's it," Peggy said. "Let's go up to the office and put these together."

Back in the office, with the aid of transparent tape, they fitted the pieces into a hopelessly inadequate reconstruction of a letter that Peggy now realized was undoubtedly destined to be of the greatest interest to the police.

The writer of that letter, Peggy knew, had it in her power to make Don Kimberly the Number One Suspect in the Stella Lynn murder.

Would the writer come forward? She doubted it, but she thought it was likely that, since one anonymous letter had been written to her, another would be written—but this time to the police.

And Peggy also realized that by falling in with Don Kimberly's highly abridged account of the evening's activities, she had nominated herself as Suspect Number Two if the police ever should learn exactly what had happened.

Peggy knew enough of E.B. Halsey's temperament to know that her future at WEFI depended on not letting the police find out all that had happened—at least for now.

E.B. Halsey, at 56, prided himself on his erect carriage, his keen eyes that needed spectacles only for reading, and his golf game.

There were whispered stories about extracurricular activities. At times, when he was with cronies whom he had known for years and whom he knew he could trust,

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it was understood Old E.B. could really let loose. There were rumors of certain wolfish tendencies he was supposed to have exhibited on rare occasions.

These last tendencies were the most delectable from a standpoint of powder room discussion at WEFI, and the hardest to verify. Old E.B. was too shrewd ever to get caught off base. He took no chances on a rebuff, and any amatory affairs he may have indulged in were so carefully masked, so skillfully camouflaged, that the office rumors, although persistent, remained only rumors.

It was 9:30 when E.B. bustled into the office, jerked his head in a quick, sparrowlike gesture, and said, "Good morning, Miss Castle," and then popped into his private office.

Ten seconds later he pressed the button that summoned Miss Castle.

That was typical of the man. He had undoubteldy arrived an hour early so he could ask what had happened the night before, but it would have been completely out of character for him to have said, "Good morning, Miss Castle. Would you mind stepping into my office?" He would instead enter his office, carefully place his hat on the shelf in the coat closet, stand for a few seconds in front of the mirror smoothing his hair, straightening his tie, and then, and only then, would he settle himself in the big swivel chair at the polished-walnut desk and press the mother-of-pearl button that sounded Peggy's buzzer.

Peggy picked up her notebook, entered the office, and seated herself in a chair.

E.B. waved the notebook aside. "Never mind the notebook. I want to ask you a few questions."

She glanced up at him as though she hadn't been anticipating this interview for the past ten hours.

"You were with Kimberly last night?"

She nodded.

"That was a nasty piece in the paper. I don't like to have the company's name brought into prominence in connection with things of this sort. A company employee dead. Body found by two other employees who are out together. Possibility of murder. It gives the company a lot of bad publicity."

"I'm sorry," she said.

He cleared his throat. "You've done newspaper work?"

"A little, on a small paper."

"You have sense. I'm going to get another secretary. From now on you're going to be public relations counselor for this company. Your first job is to see that there's no more bad publicity of the sort that's in the papers this morning.

"Your new position carries with it a substantial boost in salary. You will, of course, keep on with your column in the house organ. I like the chatty, humorous way you make the office gossip interesting, make employees sound important.

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"No, no, don't thank me. This appointment is in the nature of a trial. I'll have to see what you can do to kill the sort of talk that we're sure to get about Stella Lynn's death. Now tell me about what happened last night. Tell it all, every detail."

He paused, peering at her over the top of his glasses as though she were in some way personally responsible for Stella Lynn's death.

Peggy Castle told him about the anonymous letter, about going to the Royal Pheasant, and her conversation with Don Kimberly.

"Then you weren't with Don Kimberly?" E.B. asked.

"Not in the sense of having a date with him."

"The papers say you were dining together, that you had a dinner date. The police told me the same thing."

"That was a mistake."

E.B. pursed his lips. "Since they think you and Don Kimberly were out on a date and merely dropped in on Stella on a friendly call, I think it would be better to let it stay that way."

"May I ask why?"

"It's better not to change a story that has appeared in the press. It puts you in a bad position."

"The mistake was made by the police in assuming we were out together."

E.B. beamed at her. "So that leaves us with a clear conscience, eh? All right, we'll leave it that you and Don had a dinner date."

"But that story won't hold up. The headwaiter knows we didn't come in together; so do the table waiters."

E.B. frowned, then yielded the point reluctantly. "Very well, then, I suppose you'll have to tell them the truth."

Peggy waited. She had said nothing of the jeweled butterfly she had taken from Stella's stocking.

E.B. put the tips of his fingers together. "The pieces of the letter?" he asked.

"I have them in my desk."

"I think we'd better take a look," he said.

She brought them in to him.

"You're sure these pieces are from the envelope?"

"Yes. You can see the handwriting is the same, and this was the only hand-written letter addressed to me in the afternoon mail."

E.B. thoughtfully poked at the pieces of paper.

"How does Kimberly explain this letter?" he asked abruptly.

"He doesn't. He can't."

The telephone on E.B.'s desk rang sharply three times.

E.B. picked up the receiver, said, "Yes. E.B. Halsey."

He frowned for a moment, then said, "This call should have gone to Miss Castle's desk in the ordinary way. However—yes, I understand . . . Very well, I'll see him. Yes, bring him down here."

Halsey hung up the telephone and once more looked at Peggy over his glasses. "A Detective Nelson is

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out there. Know anything about him?"

"No."

"He wants to talk with me. The receptionist became flustered and rang me personally. The call should have gone through your office. However, the damage is done now. I don't want to antagonize the police in any way. You might step out to receive him."

She nodded and went to the reception room just as the receptionist held the door open for E.B.'s visitor.

He wasn't the type she had expected. He might have been a successful accountant or a bond salesman. He was slender, quietly dressed, and when he spoke his voice was melodious.

"I'm Fred Nelson," he said, "from Headquarters."

He was holding a card case in his hand as though expecting that he would be called on to produce credentials, and was ready to forestall any possible skepticism. He exhibited a gold shield and gave Peggy a card, a neatly embossed card with a police shield in gold in the upper left-hand corner.

"Mr. Halsey is expecting you."

"You're his secretary, Miss Castle?"

"That's right."

"I think I want to see you both," he said. "I believe you and your escort discovered the body."

"I was with Mr. Kimberly."

He nodded.

"Do you wish to see Mr. Kimberly at the same time?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Just you and Mr. Halsey."

"Will you step this way, please."

She ushered him into Halsey's office. Nelson shook hands with E.B. and said, "I took the liberty of asking your secretary to remain during the interview, Mr. Halsey. I want to talk with both of you."

E.B. beamed at him. "That's fine. Quite all right. Sit right down. Anything we can do for you we'll be glad to do. A most unfortunate occurrence. Always hate to have these tragedies. We're something like a big family here, and these things cut pretty close to home."

"You knew Miss Lynn on a personal basis, then?" Nelson asked.

E.B.'s steady eyes surveyed the detective over the top of his glasses. He hesitated for approximately two seconds as though debating just how to answer the detective's question, then said curtly, "Yes."

"Had you known Miss Lynn before she came to work here?"

"That is the point I was about to bring up," Halsey said.

"Go ahead. Bring it up."

"I knew Miss Lynn before she came to this city. As a matter of fact, she asked me about a position and I told her that I would be glad to refer her to the head of our personnel department and suggest that other things being equal—other things being equal—you understand, Mr. Nelson?"

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Nelson nodded.

"—other things being equal," Halsey went on, "I'd like to have her taken on. Of course, in a business the size of this the personnel department handles the entire thing. They know the vacancies and the abilities that are required. They have, I believe, tests for—"

"The point is that you interceded for her with the personnel department and that Stella Lynn got a job?"

"That's putting it in a rather peculiar way."

Nelson turned to Peggy. "Did Stella Lynn seem to be brooding, worried, apprehensive?"

"I didn't know her well, Mr. Nelson. I saw her off and on and chatted with her when I saw her. She was always cheerful. I'd say she was probably the least likely candidate for suicide—"

"I wasn't thinking about suicide."

"Well, a person doesn't worry about murder."

"I wasn't thinking about murder."

E.B. cleared his throat. "Well, then, may I ask what the devil you *were* thinking about?"

Nelson glanced at Peggy Castle. "Something else," he said. "Something Miss Lynn could well have worried about."

"Good Lord," Peggy said impatiently, "I understand English, and I understand the facts of life. Are you trying to tell us that she was pregnant?"

Nelson nodded.

E.B. put his elbows on the desk, his chin in his hands. "Good Lord!" he murmured.

"You seem upset," Nelson said.

"He's thinking of the good name of the company," Peggy explained, "—of the publicity."

"Oh, I see," Nelson said in a dry voice. He turned to Peggy. "I'd like to have your story, Miss Castle, right from the beginning."

"There isn't any story. Mr. Kimberly and I decided to look in on Stella Lynn, and we found her lying dead on the floor. We called the police."

"That certainly is a succinct statement," Nelson said.

"I don't know how I could elaborate on it."

"You didn't know Stella Lynn well?"

"Not particularly well, no."

"How did it happen that you went to call on her, then?"

"It was Mr. Kimberly's suggestion."

"And why did he want to call on her last night?"

She said, "I'm afraid that Mr. Kimberly doesn't think it necessary to confide in me."

"Perhaps he'll be a little less reticent with *me*," Nelson said.

"Perhaps."

Nelson turned toward the door. "Well, I just wanted to find out what you knew about Stella Lynn's background," he said. "I'll talk with Kimberly, and then I'll be back."

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He walked out without a word of farewell.

As the door closed, E.B. picked up the telephone and said to the receptionist, "A man by the name of Nelson is leaving my office. He wants to see Mr. Kimberly. I want him to be delayed until I can get Kimberly on the phone and—What's that? . . . Oh, I see . . . Well, that explains it. All right."

E.B. hung up, looked at Peggy, and said, "That's why he didn't ask to have Kimberly in on our conference. Mr. Kimberly is not in the office this morning. No one seems to know where he is."

He paused for a moment, digesting that information, then said, "Of course, that is a temporary expedient. It gives him a certain margin of time—I notice you didn't tell Detective Nelson about that letter, Miss Castle."

"I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"It doesn't fit in with Kimberly's version of what happened. Kimberly says Stella Lynn called him up around ten thirty in the morning and told him that she had to see him. He's the one who suggested the Royal Pheasant. Yet this letter, which was postmarked the day before, informed me that Kimberly and Stella Lynn were going to be dining at the Royal Pheasant."

E.B. regarded Peggy thoughtfully for a moment. "You have a remarkably shrewd mind, Miss Castle."

She flushed. "Thank you."

"Now, just what do you have in your mind?"

She said, "Stella Lynn's desk. I'd like to clean it out. She'll have some private stuff in there. I'd like to look through it before the police do. No one has said anything about—"

"A splendid idea," E.B. said. "Get busy. And don't tell me what you're doing. I'd prefer not to know *all* the steps you're taking. That desk, for instance. In case you should find a diary or something—Well, you'll know what to do."

E.B. regarded her over the tops of his glasses. "I'm *sure* you'll know what to do."

Peggy placed a cardboard carton on top of the desk that Stella Lynn had occupied and began to clean out the drawers, fully realizing the fact that the typists at the adjoining desks were making a surreptitious check on all her actions.

There was an old magazine, a pair of comfortable shoes to be worn at work, a paper bag containing a pair of new nylons, a receipt for rent on her apartment, a small camera in a case, and a half-empty package of paper tissues.

There was no diary. But there was a disarray of the drawers, as if they might have been hurriedly searched at an earlier hour, perhaps before the office had opened.

Peggy wondered what had led E.B. to believe there might be a diary in the desk. She dumped the

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contents of the desk into the carton, tied the carton with heavy string, and then, with a crayon, printed the name *Stella Lynn* on the side. Having done all this to impress the typists at adjoining desks, Peggy carried the carton back to her own office.

When the door was safely closed she opened the package and inspected the camera. The figure "10" appeared through the little circular window on the back of the camera, indicating that nine pictures had been taken.

Peggy turned the knob until the roll had been transferred to the take up spool, removed it from the camera, and carefully wiped off the camera to remove her fingerprints. She slipped the camera back into its case, put the case into the carton, tied it up with string, and stepped to the door of E.B.'s private office.

She tapped on the door. When she received no answer, she tried the knob; it turned and she gently opened the door.

E.B. was not in his office.

She went back to her desk. A piece of paper that had been pushed under the blotter caught her eye. She pulled it out.

It was a note from E.B., scrawled hastily:

Miss Castle:

As soon as you left my office I recalled an urgent matter that had escaped my attention in the excitement incident to the interruption of our regular morning program. It is a matter of greatest importance and must be kept entirely confidential. I am working on that matter and expect to be out of the office for some time. I will get in touch with you as soon as I have a definite schedule. In the meantime I will be unavailable.

It was signed with the initials *E.B.*

Peggy looked at it. "Well," she said, "Kimberly and Halsey. That makes it unanimous."

Peggy batted her eyes and turned her most charming manner on Mrs. Maxwell, the apartment house manager.

"I certainly hope you don't think I'm too ghoulish, Mrs. Maxwell, but, after all, a girl has to live."

Mrs. Maxwell nodded almost imperceptibly, studying her visitor through narrowed eyes, about which pools of flesh had been deposited so that the eyes seemed to be about half normal size. Her hair had been dyed a brilliant orange-red, and her cheeks had been rouged too heavily.

"Apartments are *so* hard to get," Peggy went on, "and, of course, I read in the paper about Stella Lynn's unfortunate death. So I know that the apartment is untenanted, and I know that you're going to have to rent it. Some people might be superstitious about moving into an apartment of that sort, but I definitely am not, and, well, I thought I'd like to be the first applicant."

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Again the nod was all but imperceptible.

"I'm not too well fixed," Peggy said. "I'm an honest working girl, and I don't have any—protector—in the background, but I do have fifty dollars saved up that I'd planned to use as a bonus in getting exactly the right kind of apartment. If this apartment suits me, since I wouldn't have any need for the bonus, I'll give it to you in gratitude for the personal inconvenience of showing me the apartment."

This time the nod of the head was definitely more pronounced, then Mrs. Maxwell said, "My hands are tied, right at the moment."

"In what way?"

"I can't get in to show the apartment."

"Oh, surely you have a key—"

"The police have put a seal on both doors, front and back. They've been looking for fingerprints and —"

"Fingerprints!" Peggy exclaimed. "What do they expect to find out from fingerprints?"

"I don't know. They've put powder over the whole apartment. They've ordered me to keep out. They've sealed up the doors so they can't be opened without breaking the seal."

"Well, you can tell me about the apartment?"

"Oh, yes."

"How about milk?"

"Milk can be delivered at the back."

"And the collection of garbage and cans?"

"There are two receptacles, one for cans and glass, one for garbage. The garbage is collected every other day, the cans and glass twice a week. The tenant has to deposit the material in receptacles on the ground floor in the back."

"I believe that this apartment is on the fifth floor," Peggy said.

"That's right."

"I have to walk down five flights of stairs to—"

"Four flights, dearie."

"Well, four flights of stairs to deposit cans and garbage?"

"I'm sorry. There isn't any dumbwaiter service."

"May I take a look at the back stairs?"

"Certainly. Just go through that door at the end of the corridor. Look around all you want, dearie."

When the going got tough, Peggy Castle sometimes appealed for help to her Great-uncle Benedict.

Benedict Castle had lived a highly checkered career. One of Peggy's earliest memories was of hearing the mellifluous voice of Uncle Benedict reminiscently extolling the virtues of Benedict's Body Builder.

". . . Not a chemical, ladies and gentlemen, that tries to achieve health by whipping the worn glands, the tired muscles, the jaded nerves to greater and greater effort until finally the whole machine breaks down, but a tonic, ladies and

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gentlemen, that helps Mother Nature renew worn glands, create new cells, build new muscles, and make new blood. Now, who's going to be the first to get one of these bottles of B.B.B., offered tonight not at the regular price of ten dollars, not even at the half price of five dollars, not at the special advertising introductory price of two dollars and a half, but at the ludicrously low price of one dollar! Only one dollar to build the body into renewed health!"

That had been 20 years before. Peggy, four years old, had been an orphan—too young to appreciate the tragedy that had deprived her of both father and mother—an orphan picked up and raised as their own child by Uncle Benedict and Aunt Martha.

The days of the patent medicine vender had long passed, but Uncle Benedict loved to review the patter he had used in his prime, the patter that had enabled him to travel around, living, as he expressed it, "on the fat of the yokels." It was before the days of Federal Trade Commission supervision, the Pure Food and Drug Act, and the income tax.

Uncle Benedict had had a horse-drawn van that by day served as living quarters and laboratory, at night opened to provide a stage on which his magic fingers performed feats of sleight of hand while his magic tongue brought in a steady stream of silver coins on which there was no income tax and no necessity to account to anyone.

No one knew how much Uncle Benedict took in. He went where he wished, did what he wished, and spent his money as he wished.

When the patent medicine business began to die, other infinitely more lucrative fields opened up. It was the era of mining stock and the wildcat oil speculator. Gradually Uncle Benedict drifted into a gang of clever sharpshooters, a gang in which Uncle Benedict was referred to as "The Sleeper." Never was there another man who could put on such a convincing act of sleeping while his ball-bearing mind was working out plans for fleecing suckers.

Uncle Benedict was at his best in the club car of a transcontinental train. He'd sit down, drink a beer, then let his head droop forward in gently audible slumber. People sitting next to him would discuss their business affairs with enough detail so that Uncle Benedict could figure out the correct approach.

Then Uncle Benedict would give a convulsive nod, a rather loud snore, waken with such evident embarrassment and look around him with such a panic-stricken apology for his snoring that the whole carful of people would spontaneously break into laughter.

After that Uncle Benedict was right at home.

Some ten years before, twinges of pain had announced the coming of arthritis. Gradually the slender, sentient fingers that had been able to

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deal cards so convincingly from the bottom of the deck, or pick pockets with such consummate skill that a wallet could be lifted, carefully examined, and returned to its proper place, all without the sucker's having the faintest idea that he had been "cased"—gradually the nimble fingers began to thicken at the joints.

Now Uncle Benedict, confined to a wheel chair, dozed through the twilight of life, his mind as keenly active as ever, and even Martha, his wife, was unable to tell when his dozing was genuine slumber or when he was merely keeping his old act in practice.

Those who had once known Uncle Benedict never forgot him. His friends worshiped the ground he walked on. It was a matter of police record that on three occasions suckers whom he had fleeced had refused to prosecute, stating publicly that they valued their brief companionship with Uncle Benedict far more than the money that he had taken from them.

One of his victims had even gone so far as to place an ad in the personal column reading: *Dear Benedict, Come home. All is forgiven. We like you even if it did cost us money.*

Not even Martha knew the ramifications of Uncle Benedict's connections. With a photographic memory for names, faces, and telephone numbers, Uncle Benedict kept no written memoranda. From time to time he would arouse himself from what seemed to be a sound sleep, send his wheel chair scurrying across to the telephone, dial a number, and give cryptic instructions. Occasionally men came to the house, men who regarded Uncle Benedict's slightest word as law, men who shook hands very gently so as not to bring pain to the thickened joints, men who left envelopes containing crisp green currency.

The envelopes went in the wastebasket, the currency went into Uncle Benedict's pocket.

"Income tax!" he'd snort, when Aunt Martha asked him about his business affairs. "You don't pay income tax on gifts. That's a free-will offering." And that was all anybody ever got out of him.

Only once had he elaborated. He explained to Martha, "I showed a man how to make some money. I thought out a scheme. I picked the one man who could put that scheme into operation. When the scheme paid off he made me a gift. You couldn't report a gift like that to the income tax. I didn't even count the money. That would have been looking a gift horse in the mouth."

Aunt Martha answered Peggy's ring. "Why, hello, Peggy. What on earth are *you* doing?"

"I'm up to my neck," Peggy said.

"I read in the papers that you discovered the body of a girl who'd died from poison."

"That's right."

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"Well, for heaven's sake, let's not stand here gassing. Come on in."

Aunt Martha had for years been Uncle Benedict's "assistant," the assistance consisting of wearing a pair of skin-fitting black tights, a skirt that fell barely below the hips, a plunging neckline, and a fixed smile.

When Uncle Benedict had come to the point in one of his exhibitions where it was necessary to make a swift substitution or a few passes with the hand that he wanted to be invisible to the audience, Martha would "spontaneously" wiggle her hips, the fixed smile would become broader and more animate, and then the hip motion would swing into a rhythm of pure vivaciousness and uncontrolled animal spirits. As Uncle Benedict used to describe it, "It gave me the opportunity to do the trick, but by the time I'd got it done, half of the audience just didn't give a damn. They kept on watching Martha's hips."

"How's the old warrior?" Peggy asked.

Aunt Martha looked into the living room and said, "He's sound asleep, or thinking out a new scheme. I never know which."

The Sleeper was sitting in his chair, head drooping forward and slightly to one side. He was gently snoring. Abruptly he jerked into conscious wakefulness, choking off an extra loud snore in the middle. He looked at Peggy with every sign of embarrassment. "Good Lord, Peggy, how long have you been here?"

Peggy didn't deign to answer. She knew from the sheer perfection of his act that the old Sleeper had merely been keeping in practice.

"Uncle Benedict, I'm up against it. I'm in a pint of trouble."

"That ain't so much trouble," Benedict said, smiling his magnetic smile.

"I've been holding out on the police."

"Well, why not? You can't go around blabbing *all* you know."

She told him the whole story, and he listened carefully. "What do you want?" he asked when she had finished.

She said, "In the can container for Apartment Five Nineteen are the broken remnants of a whiskey bottle. I want that salvaged before the can collector gets it. I want to have it processed for fingerprints, and then I want the latent prints photographed and preserved so they can be used as evidence at any time."

"What else do you want?"

"Your immoral support."

Uncle Benedict sent his wheel chair gliding over to the telephone. He dialed a number, waited, then said, "George?"

He waited a moment, then gave the address of the apartment house where Stella Lynn had lived. "There's a broken whiskey bottle in a galvanized can in the back yard with the number five nineteen on the can. I want that broken bottle

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carefully preserved. Dust it for fingerprints. Fix any prints you find so they'll stay there a long time. I also want 'em photographed.

"Now, you'd better have somebody with you to be a witness in case you're called on to make an identification of that bottle. Your record ain't so good . . . Who's that? . . . Yes, he'll be fine . . . If anybody says anything, flash a badge showing you're a sanitary inspector, and make a kick about some of the regulations being broken . . . That's right, get them on the defensive . . . Okay, let me know when you have it. Goodbye."

Uncle Benedict hung up and turned to Peggy. "That's taken care of. If you should need anything else let me know."

His eyelids drooped and his head nodded.

Peggy took elaborate precautions to see that no one was following her and then called for the pictures she had left for a rush job of developing and printing.

In the privacy of her apartment she studied the nine pictures and was utterly disappointed. One picture at the beach showed a handsome young man in tight bathing trunks. He had blond wavy hair, an attractive smile, and a magnificent physique, but he meant nothing to Peggy.

There was a shot of an automobile parked by the beach; two pictures of Stella Lynn in a bathing suit that would never have passed any censor anywhere at any time. The bathing suit had evidently been concocted by knotting three bandanas carefully arranged so that they showed all the curves of her figure. It was a suit that was not intended to have any contact with the water.

There was a picture showing the back of an automobile, with a young man lifting two suitcases from the trunk. A series of small cabins with garages showed in the background of this picture.

Peggy looked for the license number on the automobile. Unfortunately the man was standing so that he concealed all except the last three figures—861.

Peggy studied a picture of a parked car with a stretch of beach in the background. Here again there was no opportunity to get any part of the license number. The car was shown sideways.

There was a picture of a picnic lunch spread out on the beach. The young man with the slender waist and square shoulders was seated cross-legged.

The telephone rang, and Peggy answered it.

Don Kimberly's voice said, "Thank heaven I've caught you, Peggy."

"What's the matter?"

"I got up to the office this morning and learned that a police detective was looking for me. I thought we should find out a little

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more about that letter before I talked with anyone, so I've been hiding out, but I didn't want to hide out from you, and I didn't want you to think that I'd left you to stand the gaff. I've been trying to get you all day."

She felt a big surge of relief. "Oh, that's fine, Don," she said. "I'm glad you thought of me. Where are you now?"

"Right at the moment," he said, "I'm at a pay telephone."

She said, "I understand you're quite a photographer."

"I do quite a bit of photographic work, yes."

"I have some films that I think should be—well, I think we should enlarge one or two of them."

"Where did you get the films?"

She was silent.

Kimberly said, "Oh-oh, I get it now."

"How long will it take to do it?"

"How many are there?"

"Nine. But I think only two or three are important."

"Nothing to it," he said. "We could make enlargements just as big as you want, or pick out the part of the film you wanted enlarged, and then we could go out to dinner. By the time we got back the enlargements would be dry, and we could study them carefully."

"Could you do that all right?"

"Sure. I'm all fixed up for it. I'll come around and pick you up."

"All right, but give me half an hour to shower and dress."

"Thirty minutes on the dot, and I'll be there," he said.

Peggy hung up and dashed for the shower, experiencing a peculiar feeling of exultation that Don hadn't left her to face the issue alone.

Don Kimberly showed Peggy around his apartment with a sense of pride, pointing out the framed photographs on the walls.

"You took all these?" she asked.

"All of them," he said. "I like dramatic cloud effects. You can see from these pictures that I've gone in for thunderheads and storms over the ocean. Of course, you deliberately dramatize that stuff by overcorrecting with a red filter, but it gives you a sense of power, of the surge of the elements, of the forces of nature."

"It's wonderful," she said. "They're—they're believable. They're true. They somehow symbolize life. They're forceful and dramatic."

"I'm glad you like them.— Want to see the darkroom now?"

"I'd love to."

"Let's take a look at those films, Peggy."

She handed him the envelope. He brushed the prints aside and studied the negatives.

"Well," he said, "the girl used an expensive camera."

"How in the world do you know without seeing it?"

"You can tell by the films," he said. "The films are wire sharp.

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That means she had a coupled range finder and a very high-grade lens. That's why I like to look at negatives instead of prints. The negatives tell you the story. Lots of times a cheaper lens will give you a warm black that makes the print seem all right, but the minute you start to blow it up it fuzzes out on you. We'll make some enlargements right away."

"Where's the darkroom?" she asked.

He laughed. "This is a bachelor apartment. There was a big pantry off the kitchen, a lot bigger than I needed, so I made it lightproof, installed running water, and fixed up a darkroom. Come on in, and I'll show you my workshop."

He led the way into the darkroom and showed Peggy the two enlarging cameras. One of them used what he called "cold light," and the other used condensers for sharpness of detail.

Kimberly poured chemicals into stainless-steel trays. "We'll have these pictures enlarged in a jiffy. Why so thoughtful, Peggy?"

"Because I want to ask you something that's probably none of my business."

"What?"

"You know of Stella's condition?"

"Yes."

"Were you—" she asked, "that is—were you—"

"You mean am I the man in the case?"

"Yes."

"No." He was silent for a few moments. Then he added, "I've known Stella for years. She was working in a cafeteria when I first knew her. She was a good-natured, lovable kid. I saw her a few times. Then someone put me on a committee to pick the queen of some local festivities. There was a line-up of a lot of girls there in bathing suits, and to my surprise I saw Stella Lynn in the line-up.

"I don't think the fact that I knew her influenced my judgment. Anyway, I voted for her, and so did the other two judges. She was elected queen of the outfit. That was three years ago. She's put on weight since then, but at that time—well, she had a *good* figure."

"Go ahead," Peggy said, then added, "that is, if you want to."

"I want to. I want you to know what the situation was. Stella rang me up to thank me for voting for her, and I congratulated her on winning the contest on sheer merit. Then I lost track of her for a while. Then she rang up again and said she wanted to get away from the small town, wanted to go to the city. I gathered there had been a heartbreak."

"That's the part I wanted to know about," Peggy said.

"Why?"

"Because I'm trying to reconstruct Stella's life."

"Actually," Don Kimberly said, "I don't know too much about her

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background, Peggy. Do you believe that?"

"Of course."

"There are some who won't," he said thoughtfully. "However, to get back to your question. She was in love with someone. I don't know who he was, but I have an idea he was a no-good. Stella wanted to get out of town. She was pretty well broken up, and she was broke financially. I had to lend her money to clean up a few little bills she had around Cofferville and help her get started on a new job. I had no idea her new job was in our company until I met her there."

"E.B. Halsey fixed that up for her," she said.

"I know. E.B. knew her dad in Cofferville. He's been dead some five years, but E.B. knew him and liked him."

"And knew her?"

"Apparently."

"How well?"

"I don't know. Stella never talked about her friends. I've been trying to contact E.B. He isn't available."

"I know. This money you lent her, Don—did she pay it back?"

"Yes, why?"

"She needed a lump sum. You gave her a check?"

"Yes."

"But when she paid you back it must have been just a little here and a little there in cash."

"It was."

"Then she didn't have anything to show that she paid you?"

"Are you suggesting I'd try to make her pay twice?"

"I'm thinking of the way the police will look at it," she said. "The banks keep records on microfilm of all checks that pass through their hands."

"I know," he said curtly, and she could tell that he was worried.

The doorbell rang sharply, insistently.

Kimberly looked at her in dismay. "I was hoping we could have a chance to get together on a story before— I'll have to answer it, Peggy, particularly since you're here."

He led the way out of the darkroom and opened the front door.

Detective Fred Nelson and a young woman stood at the door. "Hello, Kimberly," Nelson said easily. "This is Frances Bushnell—in case that means anything to you."

Don Kimberly, without inviting them in, said, "How do you do, Miss Bushnell."

"It's Mrs. Bushnell," Nelson said. "We're coming in, Kimberly." He pushed past Kimberly, saw Peggy, and said, "Well, well, it seems the gang's all here. Sit down, folks."

"Since you're playing the part of host," Kimberly said coldly, "perhaps you'd like to mix some drinks?"

"Now, keep your shirt on," Nelson told him. "This is business. I'm going to be brief. Mrs. Bushnell was a close friend of Stella Lynn's. She and her husband and Stella's boy friend used to go out on foursomes.

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Tell them about those foursomes, Frances."

Frances Bushnell seemed ill at ease.

"Go on," Nelson said, "get it off your chest. Don't pull any punches. We may as well find out where we stand now as later."

"Well," Mrs. Bushnell said, and paused to clear her throat as though not quite certain of herself. "Pete, that was my husband—he still is—and Stella, and Bill Everett—"

"Now, who is Bill Everett?" Nelson interrupted.

"That was Stella's boy friend."

"And when was this?"

"When she was in Cofferville, working in the cafeteria as cashier."

"All right, go ahead."

"Well, Pete and I and Stella and Bill used to go out on week-ends together. We were all friends. Pete and I got married. I got to know Stella quite well."

"What about this Bill guy?" Nelson asked.

"He turned out to be no good. I think he got into some trouble somewhere. I know it broke Stella's heart. I think she was really fond of him."

"How long ago was this?"

"About two years ago."

"Then what?"

"Pete and I got married and came here to live. When Stella came she looked us up. I still kept in touch with her."

"Now, when was the last time you saw her?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Where?"

"In a cocktail bar on Fifth Street."

"You just happened to run into her, or did you have an appointment, or what?"

"It's a sort of gathering place. Some of us girls who work in offices drop in for a little chat and a cocktail."

"Okay, go ahead."

"Stella was there."

"What did she say?"

"Well, we talked for a while about this and that and I asked her if she wanted to have dinner with me and she said no, that she had a dinner date with a Prince Charming who was taking her to a night spot—that she had something to tell him that was going to be a jolt to him."

"Did she tell you the man's name?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Don Kimberly."

"Did she tell you she was going to let him know he was about to become a father?"

"She said she was going to tell him something that was going to jolt him."

Nelson turned to Kimberly. "Thought you'd like to hear this," he said. "In view of Mrs. Bushnell's story I think I'll take a look around—unless, of course, you have some objection. If you do, I'll get a warrant and look anyway."

"I see," Kimberly said sarcasti-

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cally. "The good old police system. If you can't solve a crime, start trying to pin it on someone."

"Who said anybody was trying to pin anything on you?"

"You might as well have said it," Kimberly blazed. "Go right ahead. Look through the place. I'll just go along with you to make sure you don't plant anything."

"Now, is that nice?" Nelson asked. He got up and walked around the living room, then pointed to a door and asked, "What's this?"

"Bedroom," Kimberly said curtly.

Nelson went in. The others followed him. Nelson looked around, opened the door of the clothes closet, carefully studied the clothes, looked into the bathroom, and gave particular attention to the bottles in the medicine cabinet.

Then he went into the kitchen, pointed to another door, and asked, "What's that?"

"Darkroom."

Nelson pushed in. The others stood in the doorway. Nelson said, "You have your amber light on; you're all set up for something."

"Yes, I was doing a little enlarging."

"He was showing me something about photography," Peggy said.

"I see," Nelson said in a tone of voice that indicated his mind was far away. He began opening the various bottles on the shelves and smelling the contents. He said, "I do quite a bit of photography myself. You've got a little more expensive equipment here than I can afford. That's a swell enlarger. You like the condensers better than the cold light?"

Kimberly made no answer.

Nelson whistled a tune as he moved around the darkroom, looking over the bottles, studying the labels, smelling the contents.

Suddenly he paused. "What the hell's this?" he asked.

"Potassium bromide. If you're a photographer you should know."

"The hell it is. That stuff comes in large crystals. This is— Smell it."

"I don't think it has any odor," Kimberly said.

"Well, this stuff does. Take a smell. And don't get your nose too close to it. You might wish you hadn't."

Kimberly sniffed the bottle gingerly, then turned puzzled eyes toward the detective. "Why," he said, "that smells—smells like—"

"Exactly," Nelson agreed. "It smells like potassium cyanide. It *is* potassium cyanide."

Abruptly he put the bottle down, put the cork back in place, and said, "I don't want anyone to touch that bottle. I'm going to process it for fingerprints. I left my fingerprints around the neck of the bottle, but I didn't leave them on the rest of it. And now, Mr. Donald Kimberly, I'm sorry, but I'm arresting you for the murder of Stella Lynn. Hold out your wrists."

(*Continued on page 129*)

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

Now, don't get the notion that a crime of one sort or another is committed every day in the week at Aldershot High School—so that Mr. Strang, the science teacher, can play detective. But it is interesting how many criminous puzzles the students and activities of a high school can create, and how different they are as detective problems.

Mr. Strang is in high form in this newest of his high school adventures in observation and perception—and in deductions therefrom. The lovable and peppery old science teacher is one of the most welcome newcomers to the family of detectives who appear exclusively in EQMM. Long may he rave, rant, and ratiocinate!

MR. STRANG SEES A PLAY

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

THE THREE FIGURES, EACH WEARing a long tattered robe, stood in almost complete darkness, with only their outlines visible. In front of them a large caldron was suspended from a rude tripod over what appeared to be the glowing coals of a fire. Out of the caldron issued a sickly white vapor which dribbled down the outside edges and swirled like small satanic lizards about the feet of the dimly seen figures.

A greenish light sprang up, giving a ghastly illumination to the scene. The three wraithlike forms looked at one another and cackled evilly. The stringy wisps of white hair, hanging limply over their shoulders, and the pale, wrinkled faces, looking strangely like skulls in the dim light, made it clear that they could be nothing but witches.

One of the three weird sisters took a long spoon from a hidden pocket in her robe and came forward to the caldron. She held the spoon high as if making some devilish incantation and then plunged it deep into whatever vile brew was being concocted. She began to speak in a high, cracked voice:

"When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?"

The second witch grasped the spoon, waved her hand through the mist above the caldron, and continued:

"When the hurlyburly's done,

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When the battle's lost and won."

The two looked expectantly at the third figure, who took up the chant:

"That will be ere the set of sun."

Standing near an exit door at the rear of the Aldershot High School auditorium, Mr. Strang softly clapped his gloved hands together in approval. The high school Drama Club's production of *Macbeth* was off to a flying start, and there was a large audience in spite of the cold, wet weather that Aldershot had been having for almost a week.

The thin science teacher reminded himself that he would have to find Frank Tabor, the Drama Club's faculty advisor and director, and offer his congratulations. The makeup on the witches, none of whom was more than sixteen years old, was superb, and Mr. Strang marveled at the way in which a few cardboard cartons, a bit of gray paint, and some dried twigs had been transformed into the required blasted heath called for in the stage directions.

The witches disappeared into darkness again, and there was a squeaking of pulleys as a backdrop was lowered for the next scene. Mr. Strang shifted his overcoat from one arm to the other and bent down to pick up a gallon thermos jug from the floor beside him. Then he walked out into the lobby just as the stage lights behind him came up on what the program described as *A Camp Near Forres*, and Duncan, King of Scotland, began to examine the wounds of a blood-stained soldier.

"Not walking out on us already, are you, Mr. Strang? Is the play that bad?"

Mr. Strang set down the thermos jug, ran slender fingers through his fast-disappearing gray hair, and looked around the lobby. In one corner, the doorway leading to the office of assistant principal Dan Wilstater had been converted into a temporary box office by latching the door in its open position and placing a wooden table across the opening.

The old science teacher pulled from a pocket of his jacket a pair of black-rimmed glasses and put them on, peering at the figure in the doorway. "No, I was about to start looking for you, Frank," he said finally. "What are you doing out here? I thought you'd be backstage directing traffic or whatever it is a director does."

Frank Tabor shrugged and continued to count money into neat piles as he talked. "In the last five weeks I've seen enough of *Macbeth* to last me the next five years," he said. "From now on, the kids are on their own. Besides, they won't make any mistakes. With all the rehearsals we've had they could do this play blindfolded. I thought I'd come out here and see how much money we took in."

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"Your cast certainly started out in fine style," said Mr. Strang. "That opening scene with the three witches is one of the spookiest things I've seen in years."

"Yeah, we spent a lot of time on that," replied Tabor. "It kind of gets the audience in the mood for what's to come next. Incidentally, I want to thank you for your help. It added a lot to the play."

"Think nothing of it. Glad to be of service. Besides, it was one of the boys in the Science Club who came up with the idea. I just passed it along to you." Mr. Strang looked at the growing stack of money on the table in front of Tabor. "How are the receipts coming?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Tabor said with a wink. "I'll have to ask my business manager." He turned to the desk behind him where a girl about seventeen years old was stacking coins into neat piles. "What's our grand total, Barbara?" he called.

"With the advance sale plus the tickets we sold tonight I think it'll come to a little over six hundred dollars." Barbara Priott looked up from her work and smiled at the science teacher. "Hi, Mr. Strang," she said.

The teacher raised his battered felt hat in reply. "That's a lot of money to be responsible for, Barbara," he said. "Don't let Mr. Tabor here make off with it."

Barbara smiled shyly and continued counting the coins. Tabor placed the stack of bills in a metal box and put it in a drawer of the table. "Keep an eye on things, Barbara," he said. "I'm going to stretch my legs for a few minutes. Call me when you've finished counting, and we'll put the money in the safe."

The girl nodded. "Would you like to leave your coat in here, Mr. Strang?" she asked as Tabor moved the table and stepped out into the lobby.

"Thank you, Barbara. I think I will. And would you stash this thermos jug, too? It's getting a bit heavy to carry around."

As Barbara nodded, the science teacher removed his gloves and put them in one pocket of his coat. Shucking off the coat, he placed it on the table in the doorway, setting his hat carefully on top of it. Then he picked up the thermos jug and placed it on the table with a thump.

"Leave them there, Mr. Strang," said Barbara. "I'll put them back here as soon as I'm finished."

As Mr. Strang and Frank Tabor walked through the lobby past the open door of the auditorium, they could hear Lady Macbeth summoning up her courage for the murder of Duncan.

"Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts,
unsex me here;
And fill me, from the crown to
the toe, topfull
Of direst cruelty!"

"Poor Barbara," said Tabor musingly, lighting a cigarette. "She wanted desperately to play Lady

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Macbeth. She might have made a good one, too."

"Then why didn't you use her?" asked Mr. Strang. "Learning the lines shouldn't have given her any trouble. I have her in one of my chemistry classes, and her memory's excellent."

Tabor nodded. "She did well during the first readings, too. But apparently she chokes up under pressure. The first time I had tryouts in front of an audience she froze completely. It's too bad. Next April I'm planning to put on *Pygmalion,* and she'd have made a wonderful Eliza Doolittle."

"Any chance of her conquering her stage fright?"

"I don't know," answered Tabor. "If she'd just give some indication that she could perform under pressure I'd use her in a minute. As it is, I can't take the chance. It wouldn't be fair to the other kids."

"I see." Mr. Strang jammed tobacco from his pouch into a massive briar pipe and applied a match. "I wouldn't give up on Barbara yet, Frank," he said. "She might surprise you."

"I hope so, Mr. Strang. She wanted to be in a play this year more than anything else in the world. She's a good business manager, but I'd like to see her on stage. Look, you came to see the play, not gab with me, so why don't you go back inside? I'll help Barbara finish counting the money."

"No hurry," replied Mr. Strang. "The murders don't start coming until Act Two. And I'm a necrophile from 'way back. Now that the witches have had their big scene I'm just marking time until Macbeth gets ready to skewer Duncan and Banquo's ghost starts waltzing around the stage. And later on I'll want to see the return of the witches, of course."

Act II found Mr. Strang standing again at the rear of the auditorium. Macbeth, as portrayed by the captain of the debating team, was suitably horrified at seeing the phanton dagger, and the science teacher felt a prickling along his spine as the lights dimmed onstage and the clanging of a bell broke the hushed silence as Macbeth made ready to murder his king.

"I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell."

Mr. Strang remained long enough to watch the play's drunken porter reel across the stage, finally managing to open the gates of the castle to Macduff and Lennox before staggering off to oblivion to the accompaniment of laughter and applause from the audience. Then the science teacher went back to the lobby to await the murder of Banquo in Act III.

Behind the table in the temporary box office Barbara Priott was busily stuffing packets of bills into a manila

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envelope. As Mr. Strang walked toward the open door the girl dropped a quarter and the coin rolled out onto the marble floor of the lobby. The teacher stopped it with his foot, picked it up, and placed it on the table. It was then that he saw the boy standing inside the office. A tall, heavy-set teenager, he wore a thick wool jacket on the shoulders of which were small droplets of water.

"Who are you?" asked the teacher bluntly. Mr. Strang was certain he knew the faces of all the students in Aldershot High School, and this boy was a complete stranger to him.

The boy mumbled something that sounded like "fine."

"I didn't ask how you are, but who you are," said Mr. Strang.

"Huh? Oh. That's my name—Fein. Yeah, Johnny Fein, that's me."

"Well, Johnny, nobody's supposed to be behind that table who doesn't belong there. What are you doing here, anyway? And where's Mr. Tabor, Barbara?"

"He went backstage to see how the play was going, Mr. Strang," said the girl coolly, "and Johnny is a friend of mine. He just stopped by to pick me up. He's going to take me home after the money is all counted. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?"

Mr. Strang shook his head. "Not so long as your parents know about it," he said. "Just be sure he takes you right home. It's a bit cold outside for any—er—side trips. Besides, I was rather hoping you might find time tonight to put in a little work on that chemistry assignment you owe me. I'm afraid your work with the Drama Club has had a rather bad effect on your studies."

Barbara stared wide-eyed at Mr. Strang for a moment and then glanced at the boy standing next to her. "About that assignment, Mr. Strang—I had an idea for something I want to put in my report, and I was wondering if you'd approve it for me before I go ahead."

"I don't want to take you away from your work—or from young Mr. Fein here, Barbara," replied the teacher. "Couldn't it wait until tomorrow?"

"I have a study hall the first period, and I'd like to work on it then," said the girl. "I'll just jot down what I had in mind. It'll only take a second."

"Chaetognatha!" said the teacher vehemently. "I shouldn't do that, Barbara. Wait until we've both got more time."

But by now the girl had taken a small scrap of paper from her purse and was scribbling something on it with a ballpoint pen. When she was finished writing, and before she could hand the paper to Mr. Strang, Johnny Fein plucked it from the table and read it carefully.

"I never took much science myself," said the boy when he had finished. "I hope you can make something out of this, Mr. Strong."

"The name is Strang," replied the teacher. "S-T-R—oh, forget it." He

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picked up the paper and glanced at what the girl had written:

1. Iron + Indium
2. Hydrogen + Arsenic
3. Silver + Uranium + Nitrogen

Reference: D. I. Mendeleev

Mr. Strang shook his head, puzzling over the list. "I'm afraid you've misinterpreted the assignment, Barbara," he said. "We were dealing with chemical compounds. These are elements. Perhaps—"

"Well, really, Mr. Strang!" Barbara looked daggers at the teacher. "You suggested that reference yourself. It was during Monday's chemistry period."

Mr. Strang frowned. Perhaps it was his imagination, but it seemed to him that Barbara had put more stress on her last word than was really necessary.

"Wait a minute! Let me see that again!" Johnny Fein snatched the paper from Mr. Strang's fingers with his left hand. His right slipped inside the opening of his jacket, giving him a vaguely Napoleonic apperance. After reading it for the second time the boy shrugged and dropped it on the table.

The teacher opened his mouth to protest such patent rudeness. But suddenly he paused, looking strangely at the girl. "I—I think I see what you're getting at here, Barbara," he said slowly, picking up the list. "Maybe I can think of some way in which corrections could be made."

"I hope so, Mr. Strang," replied the girl. "I sure could use some help."

"By the way, how much did the Drama Club take in tonight?"

"Six hundred and eighteen dollars," said Barbara slowly, "and seventy-five cents."

"Look, Mr. Strang, why don't you go back in and see the show?" asked Johnny. "Barb and me, we'd kind of like to get going, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, I'm sure you would," said the teacher musingly, "but I think I've had enough of *Macbeth* for one evening. I'm going home myself. Would you mind giving me my coat, Barbara?"

The girl passed Mr. Strang's coat and hat across the table, and the teacher put them on. Then, drawing the leather gloves from a pocket, he slipped his hands into them. He turned away from the table and began to shuffle toward the doorway leading outside.

Suddenly he shook his head as if disgusted with himself. "The original absent-minded professor, that's me," he said ruefully. Turning back to where the two teenagers were peering after him, he smiled with disarming innocence. "I've forgotten my thermos jug, Barbara," he said. "Would you let me have it, please?"

Barbara lifted the wide-mouthed jug onto the table, and Mr. Strang rested one gloved hand on its top. "Say, I've got something in here that might interest you two," he

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said. He raised the jug and with his back to the doorway, unscrewed the top and reached inside. Then he spun around quickly and dropped something onto the table with a click. "Look!" he cried.

The object on the table was almost round and about as large as a golf ball. Its crystalline whiteness made it appear like some rare jewel. Instinctively Johnny Fein reached for it with his right hand. "What in blazes—" he began.

Mr. Strang quickly extended both hands and grasped Johnny's wrist. Pushing downward with all his strength, the teacher forced the open palm of the boy's hand onto the white sphere. A shrill scream echoed through the lobby. "My hand!" cried Johnny. "Oh, my hand! It's on fire! It's burning up!"

Moving quickly but surely, Barbara Priott pulled open the drawer in the table that served as a shelf for the box office. Grasping the metal cash box in both hands, she lifted it high and brought it down with a crash of jingling coins on top of the boy's head. He slithered to the floor just as a group of people, attracted by the yells of pain, came stampeding from the auditorium into the lobby.

Barbara leaned over the boy's unconscious body and unbuttoned his jacket. From the waistband of his trousers she took the small .22 caliber pistol he had been concealing and passed it gingerly to Mr. Strang.

It took almost fifteen minutes to calm the anxious parents in the lobby and herd them back into the auditorium for the start of Act III. In the assistant principal's office a police doctor had finished treating a bump on Frank Tabor's head and was examining Johnny Fein's hand. On the palm of the hand a mean-looking blister had formed, and the doctor was applying a salve to it.

Detective Paul Roberts, who had sped to the school in answer to Mr. Strang's telephone call, stood with notebook in hand, questioning the teacher and Barbara Priott.

"You know, Mr. Strang," Roberts was saying, "I always thought teaching was a nice quiet, peaceful job. That was before I met you. Now every time I come to this school I feel like bringing the whole riot squad with me."

Mr. Strang grinned.

"Okay," continued the detective, "the boy showed up while the lobby was empty and he pulled a gun. I've got all that down. Then he hit Mr. Tabor on the head and dragged him behind the desk back there. He told you, Barbara, to pick up the money for him, and you were in the middle of that job when Mr. Strang came into the lobby. Then what?"

"He put the gun back under his jacket and ducked behind the door," answered Barbara, "but I deliberately dropped a quarter, and when Mr. Strang returned it to me he saw him hiding there. Then Johnny Fein decided to pretend he was my date for tonight." The girl grimaced

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distastefully. "I thought he'd shoot both of us if I didn't go along with the act."

"Pretty smart," said Roberts. "If he could get you out of the way, Mr. Strang, he had only Barbara to deal with."

The teacher nodded. "Fortunately I was able to stop him before he added kidnapping to his other crimes."

"But what did you do to him, Mr. Strang?" asked the detective. "That hand of his looks like you worked him over with a red-hot poker. What were you carrying around hot enough to—"

"Not hot—cold," interrupted Mr. Strang. "That 'crystal' I took from my thermos jug was a piece of dry ice."

"Dry ice?"

"Yes—or to be more scientific, carbon dioxide gas cooled to a temperature of more than one hundred degrees below zero, at which point it becomes a solid. Because of its extreme cold, dry ice produces an effect on human tissue much the same as a burn. And I assure you, I held the boy's hand against that chunk of dry ice for several seconds. I wanted to make sure he wouldn't be able to reach for his gun when I released him. Fortunately, by the time I let go, Barbara had knocked him out with the cash box."

"Wait a minute," said Roberts. "Are you trying to tell me you always carry around a hunk of dry ice just for emergencies?"

"Not always—just tonight. My dry ice has a fairly important role in the play."

"Huh?"

"Come over here," said Mr. Strang, motioning to the door of the auditorium. "I think we're just about in time for one of the scenes I'm talking about."

Roberts followed the teacher inside. On the stage the three witches again stood around the caldron, dropping small objects into its seething depths.

"Fillet of a fenny snake
In the caldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting
Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing—"

And again the thick steam rose from the pot, flowing over its sides and down to the floor like something alive.

Roberts wrinkled his nose. "What's really in that kettle?" he whispered.

"The rest of my dry ice plus a little water," replied Mr. Strang. "As the water warms the dry ice, carbon dioxide is given off. That's the white 'steam' you see. And since carbon dioxide is heavier than air, it falls to the floor instead of rising as ordinary steam would do. That gimmick is the mainstay of every mad scientist's laboratory in the Class B movies. And when Mr. Tabor asked for this effect, one of the

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boys in the Science Club came up with this idea. I brought the dry ice myself because it's dangerous to handle—especially without gloves. I planned to get rid of the extra pieces where there'd be no chance of anyone touching them."

As Mr. Strang walked ahead of him out into the lobby, Roberts chuckled softly. "You might say Johnny Fein really got burned tonight—in more ways than one," he said. "But tell me, Mr. Strang—what tipped you off to what the kid was really up to? I mean with him standing right there, Barbara Priott couldn't signal you or—"

"It was her note, of course," said the teacher, taking it from his pocket. "Barbara kept her wits about her and managed to give me this right in front of the boy's nose."

Roberts looked at the note carefully, examining it front and back and even trying to read it upside down. "Iron and Indium," he said almost to himself. "Hydrogen and Arsenic . . . I don't get it, Mr. Strang. Is this a code or something?"

"In a way, yes. Look at the reference."

"E. I. Mendeleev?"

"Yes. He was a Russian who found out that certain groups of elements have almost identical characteristics. Barbara's chemistry class has studied about him. He grouped the elements into what's called a Periodic Table. Barbara, incidentally, stressed the word 'period' when she spoke to me."

"I still don't understand how—"

"In most copies of the Periodic Table each element is referred to by its symbol—a kind of shorthand way of writing its name. I insist that the students in my chemistry classes memorize those symbols. I've been told that rote memorization is bad pedagogy, but I'm sure that after this evening Barbara will agree that it does have its uses. Watch."

The teacher took the scrap of paper and began printing letters over each of the elements listed: over Iron—Fe; Indium—In; Hydrogen—H; Arsenic—As; Silver—Ag; Uranium—U; and Nitrogen—N.

"I was pretty dense there for a while," said the teacher. "What Barbara had written seemed like nonsense to me. But I finally got it."

Roberts looked at the paper and the symbols printed over the names of the elements. The symbols read:

1. Fe In
2. H As
3. Ag U N

"Fein has a gun!" cried the detective.

"Exactly," replied Mr. Strang. "It was no secret there'd be a lot of money here at school tonight—Mr. Tabor's productions are always well attended. Johnny Fein intended to scoop up the loot and get away before anyone besides Mr. Tabor and Barbara knew he was in the building. Once I was alerted that the boy was armed, my problem was to help Barbara without getting either or both of us shot. I relied on his

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curiosity about what I had in the thermos jug, and—well, you know the rest."

"Barbara was still pretty lucky," said Roberts. "The name Fein just happens to fit that Periodic Table. But let's suppose you'd been the one with the gun, Mr. Strang. Could she have spelled out your name that way?"

"No," said Mr. Strang after a moment's thought, "but the symbols for Tellurium, Actinium, Hydrogen, and Erbium would have spelled out 'teacher' which, I suppose, would have been sufficient under the circumstances. Still, if the boy had introduced himself as Pipsissewa Frackenbush or some equally long and involved name—" But a snort of laughter from the detective made Mr. Strang stop and grin.

Later, as Roberts left with his prisoner, Mr. Strang walked back to the small office where Frank Tabor was sitting with the cash box on his lap and talking to Barbara.

"Frank," said the science teacher, "a while ago you said you were afraid to put Barbara in a play because she froze up under pressure. But tonight, at the point of a gun, she put on a better performance out here than anyone on the auditorium stage. Nearly every other student would probably have screamed for help the moment I came into view. Barbara could have been killed, but she was as cool as—well, ice—when she outwitted that boy and wrote the message to me. How about giving her a crack at that Eliza Doolittle part?"

Frank Tabor considered the idea and nodded. There was a shrill girlish shriek of joy from behind the science teacher, and he felt Barbara's arms tug at the sleeve of his coat.

"Now cut that out, young lady," yelped Mr. Strang. "I don't want you to—it's undignified, that's what it is!"

But as the girl left the office, walking on air, Mr. Strang smiled to himself and passed his fingers across his cheek, trying to remember the last time he'd been kissed.

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MR. OMEGA

by JACOB HAY

MR. AGRADAMIAN WAS NOT among the world's ten richest men, nor, at 95 feet at the waterline, was his yacht, Endymion, among the world's largest private ships; but the Swiss banks which saw to his investments would cheerfully have honored a nine-figure check bearing his signature—or several of them at once, for that matter.

Nor was his real first name Omega. It was Dagbur, but in the pages of *Town and Country, The Tattler,* and other society publications, he was always "Omega." The name derived from a newspaper columnist and the period when it was fashionable to say of an unusual character that he was the absolute end, and there was no question that Mr. Agradamian was unusual. In an era of egalitarianism and blurred distinctions, when the very rich made a point of looking like branch bank managers, Mr. Agradamian looked very rich indeed, and acted accordingly. In appearance he looked like a caricature from *Krokodil* depicting Western Capitalist Imperialism Incarnate, complete from the white-piped waistcoat and frock coat to striped trousers and fawn-colored spats. But it was his mustache and beard which made Omega Agradamian a photographer's ecstasy; they were vast, iron-gray, and always impeccably groomed.

Many of Mr. Agradamian's friends, some of them even wealthier than he, felt that his ceaseless pursuit of worldly pleasures concealed a monumental boredom and total lack of purpose. They saw in his whim of having his brand-new Rolls-Royce fitted out with a body

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designed along the lines popular in 1929 yet another indication of this world-weariness. His country car, equally new, was an exact reproduction of a Deusenberg phaeton he had admired during his earliest visit to the United States.

Poor, darling Omega, they would murmur over cocktails in Claridge's, he is always looking for the end of the rainbow. Where's he off to now? The Adriatic? The Majorcas? Jamaica?

"My God, old boy, would you believe it? Omega Agradamian in Dubrovnic, of all places. Incredible." Or perhaps it would be a note in a society column: "'Mr. Omega Agradamian will carry a party of friends aboard his yacht for a cruise to Istanbul and on to the Black Sea'."

And in their minds' eyes the readers could envision the Endymion, gaily lighted, decks filled with exquisitely dressed, beautiful people, gliding through a twilit sea toward the fabled spires and minarets of old Constantinople, while white-coated stewards darted here and there, bearing frosty flagons of champagne and trays of rich dainties. God, what would it be like to have that kind of money!

But then, on the other hand, there was the image of Mr. Agradamian, his hooded eyes flanking the hawk's nose above the flaring mustache and great beard. Poor multimillionaire, he looks sick to death of it all. Bored stiff. Nothing to look forward to.

But Omega Agradamian was not bored, not in the least.

From time to time it pleased him to think of himself as a kind of modern-day Captain Nemo. More realistically, he knew that he had discovered the ultimate antidote to boredom, and it therefore delighted him that his friends should think he was forever engaged in a mindless pursuit of pleasure.

He had, along with his very considerable fortune in oil holdings, inherited from his father all that financial genius's Armenian quickness of mind which his enemies called "that damned oriental cunning." And he had accepted his father's advice that the best thing to do with prosperous companies operated by able men was to leave them alone and let the money roll in.

During the first couple of years following his father's death, Dagbur Agradamian got his first taste of the boredom of the very rich and, incidentally, acquired his nickname. He came swiftly to see what a corrosive acid this boredom could be in the too-quickly-aged faces of his friends, their fretful sarcasms and continual whining about the poor state of the world and imminent doom that socialism would bring. Then the acid burned him tragically. Nobody could possibly have expected it of Lily, who had everything—a titled family, country houses, and the remnants of what had once been one of the largest fortunes in England. Beautiful, gay (too

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gay?); always seeking some new experience, something madly different and too often finding it.

He had gone to see her only once at the private nursing home, and the Austrian psychiatrist who ran it had been blunt. There was always a remote chance of some small improvement; who could say in these matters? But that the narcotics had permanently damaged her mind was beyond question, at least in his view. Mentally, she had reverted to her childhood.

"We were engaged," Dagbur Agradamian had said softly, barely able to speak. There was sympathy in the psychiatrist's eyes, but no hope. Agradamian's mind ached with the vision of Lily, twisting her hands in her lap, smiling uncertainly at him in the austere visiting room, trying to remember who this tall handsome man was, clutching swiftly for her doll when, his eyes filled, he rose to leave.

Now Agradamian sent her a lovely new Paris doll every year on her birthday, receiving in return a childish scrawl signed only as "your young friend, Lily B." She would be in her mid-forties now, graying perhaps . . . he did not like to think about it.

It was Boy Appleyard who probably saved Agradamian's life and sanity a few weeks later after an afternoon of hunting which had seen Dagbur hurl his huge Irish hunter through a series of suicidal leaps that would have killed a lesser horse and rider. They were on the south terrace of Boy's place outside of Exeter—familiar ground to Agradamian since he and Boy had been together at Winchester and later at New College, and still later in the Royal Navy during the War. And Boy knew Lily.

"Still the most marvelous view in Devon," Boy was saying as the two of them stood, glasses in hand, staring southward to the sea, a distant silver thread against the horizon. Agradamian was silent, remembering that doll and the fierce way that Lily had pressed it to her bosom. "Well?" Boy's tone became abrupt. "What are you going to do with the rest of it, Dag? Keep on trying to kill yourself? Carry on riding like you did today and no decent hunt will have you. Why not simply put a gun to your head?"

Mr. Agradamian shrugged. "What does a man like me do? I took a fairly decent pass in economics, but who would hire a multimillionaire? I'm a fair sailor, as you know, but I can't see the merchant navy clamoring for my services. Omega Agradamian asking for a job? Taking the bread out of some poor devil's mouth who really needs it. Dammit, Boy, I should have followed your example and stayed on in the Navy, what's left of it, and just faded into the background. I might have made Captain by now, do you think?"

"Not in my particular shop," Boy replied cryptically. "We're not very

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long on promotions. I'm still a Commander, and if my sainted great-grandfather hadn't built this place, Joan and I would have only our flat in town to call home." He eyed Agradamian quizzically. "You said no one would hire you, Dag. As it happens, I know someone who just might."

"Who?"

"Me."

Agradamian stared at his host, grinning in disbelief, but Appleyard was quite serious. "Let's go into the library," he said quietly. "I want to talk to you privately."

When Joan Appleyard came down to join her husband and their guest for dinner, she found both men wearing such absurdly inscrutable expressions that she burst into laughter. "You look," she told them, "precisely like a couple of extremely wicked schoolboys. What have you two cooked up this time?"

"State secrets, Jo," her husband answered.

"Confusion to our enemies," added Agradamian.

He was at the beginning of a new career.

"I want you to change nothing," Boy had said earlier in the library. "Your way of life, what you do to pass the time, your friends, your business procedures—everything is to remain exactly as it is. If anything, play it even larger than life than you have been these past few years—if that is possible. You've already got the reputation of an international playboy and wealthy eccentric. Embroider it, old son, to your heart's content."

There was, of course, no question of compensation for Dagbur Agradamian's unique services. No intelligence service in the world could possibly, in these lean budgetary times, afford to support an operative in the magnificently flamboyant style affected by Omega Agradamian.

Which was precisely Boy Appleyard's point.

Shortly afterward, Mr. Agradamian's agent in Poole, where the Endymion rested between her far-ranging cruises, paid off the crew and later telephoned direct to his employer to say how impressed he had been by the replacements sent down from London. "Smart as the regular Navy," he said of them, which was hardly surprising.

Still later, without guests aboard and only the owner on hand, the Endymion set out ostensibly for a brief run to the Channel Islands. The dockyard crews at Portsmouth did an efficient and excellent job on certain internal conversions, most notably the transformation of one compartment from a fuel tank to a small windowless, but otherwise quite comfortable stateroom capable of accommodating two people. The space thus lost to fuel was made up elsewhere aboard. From this new stateroom a small, also concealed, passage ran below and forward to the crew quarters. From here a lad-

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der led down to the bilges, and to further supplementary compartmentation surrounding a hatch newly cut in the Endymion's bottom.

"Very neat," observed Mr. Agradamian to the superintendent in charge as he inspected the work. "Out and back again, and nobody the wiser."

"Absolutely ruddy marvelous," added young Saunders, the Endymion's new master, who, despite his four years as an officer of the Royal Navy, was vastly thrilled by this new assignment with the fabulous Omega Agradamian.

"A yacht's crew is expected to look smart," Boy Appleyard had insisted, "so you may as well have the very best we've got. Saunders has run up a first-rate record in motor torpedo boats, and Higgins, your new bosun, has been in the service for fifteen years. They'll get you into, and out of, any place you may have to go."

As to the fuel-tank-turned-stateroom, Appleyard had explained: "You probably won't have much use for it, Dag, but you might, on the other hand, wish to bring a passenger on board without your other guests being aware of it. Most of the divers who'll be assigned to you will be young officer-volunteers, and they should be able to mix fairly easily with your guests."

Above decks, the Endymion remained unchanged, but as a final frivolous touch of damn-the-expense, Agradamian elected to have her gleaming white hull painted azure blue and had a gilded Greek omega painted on both sides of the streamlined funnel.

Some weeks after Portsmouth had finished its work, Mr. Agradamian invited a group of his friends for a cruise into the Baltic. Among them were two exceedingly personable young men whom their host introduced as distant cousins of his to whom he had been promising this treat for years. They had been out to the States on family business of a confidential nature, a fact which precluded detailed questions from the overly curious.

The cruise was a tremendous success, and thanks to Mr. Agradamian's large influence and many international connections, the Endymion was permitted to visit a number of ports not ordinarily open to pleasure craft. Mr. Agradamian's guests were tremendously thrilled, with a sweet sense of danger, to actually be behind the Iron Curtain. The port authorities, for their part, were duly gratified at Mr. Agradamian's deep courtesy and superb hospitality.

"My dear Captain," Mr. Agradamian would say after a bounteous lunch beautifully served in the ivory and gilt dining saloon, "as you know, champagne does not sail well, and by the time we return to England it will be undrinkable—which would be a shameful waste of excellent wine. I insist that you al-

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low me to present you with a case for yourself and your colleagues.

It was quite effective.

And the Admiralty was much gratified, too. One cannot, in the Admiralty's view, know too much about such details as harbor defenses, possible new developments in submarine detection at harbor entrances, and other matters of which the less said the better. Mr. Agradamian's guests noticed only that his two young cousins retired to their staterooms rather earlier than the others and sometimes appeared to have spent a sleepless night, looking a trifle tired in the morning.

Other cruises, all equally lighthearted, all equally productive of valuable tidbits of information, followed. And yet, Mr. Agradamian found himself pondering more frequently—what was he, after all but a glittering front, an unlikely but perfectly logical excuse for the Endymion to laze about the seas? Other men did the real work.

He complained to Appleyard, who was sympathetic but adamant.

"The less you know the better, Dag. This can be a filthy business—so just let it go at that. No one else can do what you're doing for us, so why not be content with that knowledge? Don't soil your hands, old boy. Leave that to the professionals."

The specter of boredom hovered over Mr. Agradamian's bulky shoulders. But no doubt Appleyard was quite correct, and the less he knew, the less danger there was that he, not being a professional, might do or say something indiscreet. Enough that he was Omega Agradamian, whose Deusenberg replica trailed him obediently overland in the event that the Great Man might wish to go ashore and spin inland to a restaurant whose chef had an international reputation among gourmets.

Nonetheless, he continued to fret. . . .

Saunders told him about Hammill when he returned to Gibraltar from a flying trip to Zurich and a board meeting of one of the companies in which he held a controlling interest. Hammill had come aboard the Endymion secretly and was now, Saunders said, ensconced in the concealed cabin in the former fuel tank.

"I've decoded our orders, sir," Saunders was saying. "We're to take him up the Spanish coast to a little fishing port called Santa Ileana, beyond Malaga, put him ashore, and wait for him to come back aboard—" Saunders hesitated.

"Well?"

"I gather he'll be bringing someone along with him, sir. And, yes, the orders also add that there are some interesting Roman ruins just outside the village which you might want to show your guests. Be reason enough to drop in on an obscure little place like Santa Ileana with a yacht this size."

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Appleyard overlooked nothing, Mr. Agradamian thought. He considered his guests and decided that they would think of this as just another of Dear Omega's delicious little whims, a lovely way of breaking the voyage to Majorca.

"One other point, sir," Saunders added, his tone worried. "If you asked me, I'd say this Hammill chap is either a very odd fish or a very sick man. He looks to be holding himself together on sheer nerve and damn all else. It might be a sound idea if you looked in on him before your guests come aboard—" Saunders glanced at his wrist watch—"that's about an hour from now."

Not without effort, Mr. Agradamian made his way, via the crew's quarters and the concealed passage, to where the man named Hammill lay on the lower of the two berths in the cramped secret cabin. His face was in shadows, but a bony hand hung over the edge of the berth, hovering just above an open bottle of whiskey and a glass. It was Mr. Agradamian's first visit to this place since the Endymion's conversion at Portsmouth, and he was not surprised to find that although a conduit had been provided, the yacht's air-conditioning system was of little avail here.

"Saunders, my captain, suggested that perhaps—" Mr. Agradamian began hesitantly.

"Why the hell aren't we under way?" a hoarse voice asked angrily from the shadows.

"My guests—"

"Damn your guests. I don't care how you do it, but get them aboard and let's get started." There was a sharp intake of breath, as if the outburst had caused the man in the berth acute physical pain.

"Are you all right? Do you need a doctor?" the multimillionaire asked anxiously.

With an unexpected display of energy Hammill swung himself to sit, bowed, on the edge of the berth. His sandy hair was thin and damp with perspiration on his narrow, bony head, and the beaknosed face was taut with effort. But it was the eyes that fascinated Mr. Agradamian: they were gray, so gray as to be almost white, and they were the coldest, most merciless eyes that Omega Agradamian had ever seen.

Hammill caught his repelled stare, and grinned, baring his teeth, as he fumbled in his jacket's breast pocket for a pair of dark glasses and put them on. "Better?" he asked, his smile unpleasant. "And the answers are, no, I'm not all right, not by a long shot, and, no, I do not want a doctor, and that's an order. What I do want is for you to get the hell out of here and get us moving. When you've done that, come back here."

So this was the real thing, Agramian thought, his expression wry, as he climbed to the bridge where Saunders waited; the British Intelligence Operative in the flesh. A far cry indeed from John Bu-

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chan's heroes; the London accent, the obviously off-the-rack suit, the cheap necktie pulled open at the grubby collar. Mr. Agradamian had, of course, no way of knowing of the D.S.O. and bar that lay, long neglected, in a bureau drawer in an undistinguished flat in Kensington.

"I've got most of the crew ashore, rounding up your guests," the efficient Saunders reported. "We've managed to find 'em all except Mr. Janucek and Miss Gordon."

The American motion picture producer and his most recent star, Agradamian thought. "Try the Bristol bar," he suggested. "They do American Martinis there."

Something over an hour later, the Endymion had left Gibraltar. Agradamian, having excused himself on the pretext of consulting with his chef concerning the dinner menu, was once more closeted with Hammill, who had done extensive damage to the bottle of whiskey, and who seemed to be in somewhat better humor now that he could feel the hull throbbing beneath him.

"Appleyard says you can be trusted," Hammill began bluntly. "Have a drink. I want to talk." It was the first time Mr. Agradamian had ever been invited to have a drink aboard his own yacht. "You'll find a glass by the washstand," Hammill added thoughtfully as Agradamian poured himself a dollop of Scotch.

"I've been hurt," Hammill continued in much the same tone as if saying he had enjoyed lunch. "No need for details, except that I'll want your help."

"My dear chap, one of my guests is Ranulph Bratton, one of the best surgeons in England. Surely—"

"No! Saunders tells me we can reach Santa Ileana by tomorrow evening. I can last that long and then some, with luck and more of your whiskey. Then you and I will go ashore and pay a brief visit. We will either return with another man or we won't. That's all you need to know, except this."

Hammill fumbled in the cheap suitcase that he had carried aboard with him and from it extracted a small, evil-looking automatic pistol fitted with a silencer almost as large as the pistol itself. "Ever used one of these?" Agradamian shook his head.

"You may have to," Hammill said shortly, extending it. "Try it for the feel. The muzzle tends to drop because of the silencer, so keep it slightly high. If it happens that you have to shoot it, I want you to empty the magazine. Understood?"

Agradamian nodded, numbed and appalled by what Hammill was saying in his matter-of-fact voice. This was a far more serious business than slipping a couple of frogmen out to have a look around a harbor, and infinitely uglier. Yet wasn't this precisely what he had practically begged Appleyard to let him have a hand in? Or was it?

"I'll get some rest now," Hammill

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said. "Keep that. I've got my own."

Mr. Agradamian slept fitfully that night. He was not accustomed to a pistol beneath his pillow.

It was full dusk of the following day by the time the Endymion's deck hands had finished lashing her lines to the ancient iron bollards on the quay in the miniscule, stone-walled harbor of Santa Ileana; and no sooner was the gangplank over when, led by Miss Geraldine Gordon and her producer, Ivar Janucek, the yacht's company trooped merrily ashore to sample the dubious delights and ragged wines of the port's three waterfront taverns. Their host remained aboard to assist, as he explained it; his captain in dealing with the port authorities, if any.

What with the flaring, erratic light from the open-fronted taverns and the giant shadows cast by the nets hung up to dry from the masts of fishing boats, Mr. Agradamian and Hammill encountered no difficulty in finding their way to one of the dark little alleys that led steeply up from the quay, stepping into pitch-black doorways to let pass the occasional villager hastening toward the unusual noisy gaiety in progress. Multimillionaires' yachts and their celebrity passengers did not call at Santa Ileana every day or even every year.

Agradamian was still ignorant of Hammill's reasons for wanting him along, and the purpose of the expedition. But it was terribly clear that Hammill was in ghastly shape, his breath coming in wheezing gasps, his feet stumbling over the uneven cobblestones, his hands grasping for support. The man was going on nerve alone, wasting none of his preciously hoarded strength on talk.

The smallish neat villa on the edge of the village looked to be one of those maintained exclusively for the benefit of retired British colonels and their ladies eking out their pensions in something approaching the comforts of full pay. It was, Agradamian thought, as the black-shawled serving woman who had answered their ring showed them into the house, almost as if they had been expected.

Agradamian gasped involuntarily as the tall gray-haired man rose from the sofa before the ornate, tiled fireplace to greet them, smiling, before his expression, too, turned to one of astonishment.

"Dagbur!" said the gray-haired man. "Hammill I had been told to expect, but what in God's name are *you* doing in this abominable charade?"

"Nicholas!" Agradamian said. "Nicholas Whitehammer!"

"Sit down," Hammill's voice was barely audible.

"My dear Mr. Hammill, you seem unwell," Whitehammer said, mockingly solicitous, as the three men sat. Hammill and Agradamian took the two high-backed, heavily carved armchairs flanking and fac-

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ing the sofa. "May I send for a glass of brandy?"

"No. All I want is your decision."

"But surely my friends must have made that quite clear," Whitehammer's mild voice suggested. "I believe they spoke to you in Madrid. You should not have troubled yourself to come here."

Hammill's thin lips twisted in a grin, and his white eyes stared at Sir Nicholas Whitehammer, Director of Research at Her Majesty's Atomic Installation at Porton. Agradamian waited for the grin to straighten, the eyes to blink, while Whitehammer calmly lit a cigar. It took both of them some seconds to realize that Hammill was dead.

"Bloody fool," Whitehammer said, fully as pained as he might have been had some clumsy person upset a plate of cucumber sandwiches on his trousers. Then just as casually he directed his attentions to Agradamian. "I'm still a bit confused about your presence here, my dear Agradamian. I don't believe we've met since Ascot."

There are occasions to which it is absolutely necessary to rise, and this was one of them, Dagbur Agradamian thought. Why should a corpse sitting opposite impede the conversation of two gentlemen?

"I'm a bit confused myself," he replied easily. "He was a guest aboard the Endymion. Said you were renting a villa near here, and when I happened to remark that I knew you he suggested we put in and pay you a call. I thought it was a good idea and here we are." He wondered if the improvization would suffice.

Whitehammer raised his eyebrows. "Hammill a guest of yours?" he asked, amused.

"Not quite," Agradamian conceded frankly. "Actually, he was on the staff of an old friend of mine—you undoubtedly know him, Boy Appleyard. Seems the poor devil was coming unstuck with overwork, and Boy asked if I'd give him a lift from Gibraltar up the coast for a few days. But I'd no idea the man was that ill. And what on earth decision did he want from you?"

"Whether or not I would defect," Whitehammer said evenly.

"Good God!"

"A very clever man in some ways, Hammill was," the scientist said carefully, watching Agradamian even more carefully. "What I believe security people call a double agent. If I agreed to go to work for his real employers for three years, three hundred thousand pounds would be deposited to my numbered account in a Swiss bank. Full facilities and staff, and far superior working conditions than our shabby little operation at Porton. Vast improvement over Civil Service pay, wouldn't you say?"

"And after three years?"

"Absurdly simple. A vacation in Spain. Simply a three-year absence. And then? Return with honor, fully recovered after a siege of amnesia in a Swiss sanitarium."

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"With no questions asked?"

"None that could not be answered. Documents can be created. Hammill's people were very thorough in their planning. He called them his 'contractors'." Whitehammer chuckled.

"A chap like yourself could accomplish a great deal in three years, I venture to say."

"Enough, and more than enough."

"Three hundred thousand pounds," Agradamian said, musing. "What do you suppose this fellow would have done if you'd said 'no' to his face, that you wouldn't defect?"

"But he already knew that. My friends in Madrid told him it was quite useless to approach me here. When they advised me they had attempted to convince him and that he had refused to listen, the only thing to do was wait and tell him myself."

"Rather in the nature of a second chance for you, wasn't it?" Agradamian suggested mildly. "He might simply have shot you through a window, you know, without even bothering to come in."

"Shoot me?" Whitehammer laughed "With you as his witness? Hardly likely, is it? Besides, that sort of thing only happens in spy novels." Whitehammer was fully at ease. Agradamian looked at the ghastly figure grinning at him, sightless, from the armchair opposite.

The whole magazine, he remembered, and keep the muzzle high.

It was the least he could do for the late, not terribly pleasant Mr. Hammill. The pistol made an amazingly little bit of noise, less than that of a champagne cork popping from its bottle.

"Not witness," he said quietly, "but surrogate."

None of the late revelers in the waterfront taverns saw anything strange in the sight of two of the Endymion's crewmen assisting a very drunken guest back aboard the yacht shortly before midnight. It was much too shadowy to see who the unfortunate chap was; quite possibly a fellow crewman, rather than a guest. These things happen.

Mr. Agradamian's little pistol, set on full automatic, reposed in the dead left hand of Sir Nicholas Whitehammer, Ph.D. (Cantab.), his fingers clutching the butt.

The Endymion sailed before dawn. Mr. Agradamian did not feel that the Spanish authorities would prove troublesome; indeed, it was entirely possible that one or two high Spanish intelligence officers just might have expected something like this to happen. Channels of communications existed; tacit agreements were reached.

The remains of the late Major Anthony Hammill, D.S.O., with bar, with Captain Saunders reading the service of the Anglican Church for burial at sea, went out through the frogmen's submerged hatch. In

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a sense, a fitting end for a one-time Royal Marine Commando.

Boy Appleyard had the last word, on the terrace of the mellowed old stone house looking southward toward the Devon Coast. It was a few weeks after Mr. Agradamian had laid up the Endymion following its last Mediterranean cruise, and long after the newspapers had stilled their shrill criticisms that Her Majesty's Civil Servants were overworked to the point of nervous collapse and suicide.

"Whitehammer was too sure of himself by half," Appleyard was saying as he and Agradamian strolled the terrace, sampling their tankards of potent Devon rough cider. "That's the trouble with some of these scientific people—they develop a contempt for us poor clods of laymen and our petty little moralities. What Whitehammer told you as being Hammill's scheme was exactly what he planned to do—to defect—and exactly what Hammill was sent to stop him from doing, if he couldn't bring him home."

"But when he returned three years from now," Agradamian said, "I would have known."

"*When* he returned? He had no intention of returning."

Mr. Agradamian was silent, contemplating his tankard.

"Tell me," Appleyard asked quietly, "why did you believe in a *dead* Hammill rather than a *live* Whitehammer? Why did you believe in a dead man you never saw before in your life, a dead man accused of being a double agent, rather than in his accuser who was one of this country's top scientists?"

"Because Hammill died trying to give Whitehammer a second chance," Agradamian replied, just as quietly. "I didn't believe an evil man would have done that. In a way, Hammill dead was his own best character witness."

"Alpha and Omega," Appleyard murmured. "The beginning and the end of the Whitehammer affair. As it should be."

"I beg your pardon?" Mr. Agradamian asked.

"Alpha. That was Hammill's code name," Appleyard explained.

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Florence V. Mayberry's three previous stories in EQMM: "The Motion Picture in Mrs. Leister's Mind" (in February 1964 issue); "Out of the Dream Stumbling" (in May 1964 issue); and "A Lily in Chrissy's Hand" (in July 1965 issue). All three stories were listed by Anthony Boucher in his Honor Rolls for 1964 and 1965. If you have read the stories, you know that Florence V. Mayberry has an unusual, perhaps a remarkable talent for creating women characters—especially "disturbed" women—women who get under your skin. You may not like them, you may not even understand them, but they seize your mind and dreams and hand, and hang on no matter how hard you try to shake them off, or out . . . Now, meet Arla and Helen . . .

BITTER VETCH

by FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

Yes, Arla said to herself. *It has a swing to it.*

Bitter vetch, that wormwood wot,
Is this fair maid a varlet in reality?
Judge her not too harshly,
For she is not well gathered in the mind.

But I am, she said. *I am not only well gathered, I am puckered, I am sick, Helen makes me sick, Helen is not well gathered, I'll-not-think-about-it-now-I'll-not-think-about-it-about-it-bitter-vetch—*

She fell asleep.

"Here's your prescription," said the drug clerk. "Happy suicide."

"And many returns to you too," Arla said. "When I am dead and gone I shall return, you have been so kind."

"Bitter vetch," said the clerk. "It's poison, you know."

"That wormwood wot," said Arla. "Wormwood is bitterness, bile and gall. Bitterness and poison, it's all the same."

"But it's not the same," argued the clerk. "Not always. Wormwood makes absinthe, absinthe is intoxicating, absinthe makes the heart grow fonder."

"Absence does not," she said. "Helen's gone, and I-hate-her-I-hate-her-bitter-vetch—"

Arla awoke, dull and vaguely frightened, sleep clinging to her like the tentacles of an octopus. The sweat pouring from her made her chill as the blankets fell aside. She shivered, feeling the words of the dream roll in her mind like pool balls seeking a pocket.

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She threw the covers aside, muscles tightening as her feet touched the floor, chilled by the cold San Francisco night. She went to the dressing table and felt in the top drawer, past the pin box, pushing aside her bottle of sleeping tablets, and found her sewing scissors. She crossed to the twin bed, opposite her own, and methodically slashed its pillow.

"I wish you were here, I wish you were here!" she whispered.

Then the dream that still held her slipped away. She shook her head sharply, patted at her mouth to mute a small, lost moan.

She took the scissors back to the drawer, picked up the sleeping tablets, and went to the kitchen of the cottage that she and Helen Vermeier shared. Or did share. Helen was gone. Gone in a fury. All because finally some truth was told to her.

Slob. Man crazy. Big mouth. Hysterical. All the pentup descriptions which had been dropping, plunk, plunk, into Arla's mind for—*let me see, we've lived together for a year, I've hated her for most of that, ever since I introduced her to Roger and right off she made a play*—all that time and finally they got said. Helen had screamed and jumped out of bed. First she turned red and banged around the room. Then the red drained into a queer white, with her eyes like coals. She shoved Arla out of the bedroom and locked the door. When she came out, she went down to the basement and finally came up with her suitcase. She locked herself in the bedroom again, packed, and left.

In a hurry, running and bouncing, Arla thought with bleak satisfaction, *I really got to her this time.*

She shook one of the capsules out of the bottle, got a glass for water. But a persistent gnawing in her stomach made her realize she was hungry. She had not eaten the night before. She put the capsule back in the bottle and dropped the bottle in the pocket of her robe. She measured out some milk, put a spoon of chocolate in it, and set it over a flame.

When it was ready she sat down stiffly, as though her spare figure was brittle, and put the mug to her lips. The hot liquid trickled down her throat and she said aloud, "I'm all right. All right. I can handle the cottage alone, I never should have let her move in with me, then she wouldn't have—"

She could not endure to say it, but her mind scampered out of control, *taken Roger away from me.*

She went back to bed, averting her eyes from the other bed and its slashed pillow.

In an hour or so she awoke. Now gray foggy light paled the windows, reflected in the dressing-table's mirror at the end of the room. Involuntarily her eyes flicked to the side of the mirror which showed the other bed. Her spine chilled as she thought she saw a thin wisp of

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breath float up from the pillow. It was only her eyes, of course, watering with the strain of staring in the dim light.

She swung her legs, heavy with lethargy, over the side of the bed. Put on her robe, went to the bathroom, then to the kitchen. She stood in its center and felt her stomach tighten against the thought of eating. Nevertheless, she did eat. Bacon, an egg. When one stands all day selling books and knickknacks, dusting off antiques or running up ladders scrounging for lost, old books energy is needed.

"And staying up half the night, too," she said aloud. "Picking up after her, washing her dirty dishes after her blasted fudge, cookies, and what-not. I need plenty in my stomach." Her pale face relaxed for a moment, and she cocked one eyebrow in response to a witty thought. "A knife, no doubt you'd say, Helen dear?"

The humor disintegrated into little chips of misery that rattled in her mind. She clung to the table's edge, not daring to look up. The thought of Helen was so strong she feared she would conjure up an apparition to stand in the doorway. Accusing. Aware that the knife in her mind turned the other way . . .

It was almost nine when she walked down the steps of the small, curlicued Victorian cottage, bound for downtown San Francisco. She pulled on her gloves and settled her chin into her coat collar. Fog hovered thickly above the roofs, obscuring the block-distant trees of Golden Gate Park. A tall, broad-shouldered man with ruddy cheeks and prominent blue eyes—moist and satisfied as a fat cat after a bowl of cream—came out of the two-and-a-half story house next door.

"Hi, there! Top o' the morning, Good-looking!" he greeted her breezily. He came over, caught her arm, squeezed it.

Little chills, delicious, tingling, vibrated the nerves of her arm, up into her neck. "Good morning, Roger." Her cheeks became pink and fine drops of moisture gathered on her upper lip. "You—you look awfully good yourself."

"Well, Sugar! You're putting sweetness in Ole Roger's day with that talk!" His hand pressed softly, up, up, and snuggled under her coat collar. "A little more'n I won't be able to have two girl friends any more, you'll completely beat Helen's time. Uh—by the way, Helen's still around, I guess. Think I'll run in a minute and say good morning."

As if he didn't run in every morning. Every morning. Helen worked an afternoon shift at a hotel newsstand and never left the house until noon. Roger said good morning to her every day. Except Sunday when Arla was there. Once, before Helen came to live with her, he had run in to see her. Early. And he had kissed her on the lips, on the throat—

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"She's not there," Arla said. "She went away last night."

That took his feet off their front steps in a hurry! "Gone away! Where? She didn't say anything yesterday morning about leaving."

"I don't know where," Arla said tightly. "Just away."

"Well. Hm-m-m—not a word?"

She shook her head. "Oh, well, one of her moods, I guess," Roger said. "She's a great gal but she jumps before she thinks. And sometimes even then I wonder where the thinking comes in. She's not a cool head, like you." He laughed, a little uneasily. "But, gol-lee, not a word. Hope it didn't upset you. Tell you what, honey"—big, easy laugh—"we'll have to keep each other from getting lonesome. Be kinda nice, like old times. Say, I'll have to run now, got a district manager coming in to see how *I* manage things."

What about the other mornings, when Helen was here? Didn't the district manager ever come then?

As she watched him stride away, all the bottled up rancor of the past months seemed to run together and turn to lead. The heaviness in her made her stagger as she walked to the bus stop. She began to tremble.

Abruptly she turned into a corner drug store, went to the phone booth, and called her store. "I'm ill," she said. "I was starting to get on the bus. But suddenly I'm ill." She hung up, not waiting for a reply.

She came back to her front steps, started to climb them. Then she turned down again, ashamed of her weakness. For a few minutes she hesitated in the tiny paved yard, debating whether to change her mind and go on to work. Feeling conspicuous, she walked through the narrow space between her cottage and the boarding house next door, and sat on her backsteps. The fog was still heavy, and its moisture was cold on her face.

After a while she used her back-door key, went into the kitchen, made a cup of tea, and drank it. Then because the absence of Helen, although so long desired, hung like an ominous presence, she returned to the rear steps. Her telephone rang. "Let it, let it!" she said viciously.

She cocked her head, counting each ring. After five she could no longer tolerate it and sprang up. She ran to the hall and took the receiver off the hook. Only the buzz of the open line answered. She hung up and began to cry. "It's always *her* they want, they never want me, always *Helen, Helen, Helen*!"

"Well, she's not here!" she screamed at the telephone. "Good and gone. No, gone, but not good! What Roger sees in her—Oo-o-oh, her red sniveling nose, her mouth opening and shutting like a dummy doll when I told her I hated her! How I'd tell Roger all the silly things she said about him, how she

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was going to inveigle him into marrying her! For once she couldn't talk, the jabbering parrot!"

The telephone rang again.

This time Arla answered. It was the manager at the store, calling to see how she was. "I'm better," Arla said. "I'll be there tomorrow." Then, remembering the other telephone call, "I was—making a cup of tea a while ago and couldn't get to the phone. Did you call before? It rang."

No, the manager said, but a call had come in for her at the store, no name given. Perhaps this person had called her home.

"I'll be at work tomorrow," Arla said. *Maybe it had been Roger now that Helen was gone, perhaps a dinner date?*

Someone was walking quickly up the front steps. Arla banged down the receiver, her heart thumping. She heard the key in the lock, and ran to the kitchen. Only one person had the key.

"Arla, Arla! It's Helen! I called at the store and they said you were ill." Her footsteps were in the bedroom now. "Arla! Where are you?" A drawer opened and closed. Keys clicked on wood. "A-a-r-la! Oh, God!" Helen's voice reached a shriek. "Answer me!"

As always, the high-pitched hysteria continually latent in Helen's voice grated Arla's nerves like a rasp on a stretched piano wire. Her stomach knotted, and sour acid rose in her mouth.

"In the kitchen," she finally managed to call out.

"Oh, Arla, Arla, hon-eeee! I thought you were dead, dead! Oh, how horrible it would have been!" Helen ran skid-skid-skid, tippytoe down the hall, plunged lushly into Arla, and enveloped the stiffened figure in a plump hug. Her mouth splashed a kiss on Arla's cheek. "Oh, I couldn't stay mad—I began thinking, oh, God, what if—if something *bad* happened, you know, people do silly things when they're upset and it did seem so serious yesterday—I mean I *never* was so wrought up! Arla, honey, is it your stomach, did you—you didn't *take* anything you shouldn't have, I mean—oh, isn't it wonderful our little tiff's all made up. Arla's not maddy-waddy with Helen any more, are you?" Archly. "That's why you were sick today. Grieving. Well. Helen's not mad. Not a speck. All the baddies are over. Tonight Helen will make Arla some tookies 'n tandy, lots of goody-woodies, and—" even more archly—"invite little old Roger-boy to help eat them."

Her round, plump face elongated into a square with the weight of seriousness. "Honey, Helen needs to have a big old talk with you and get you straightened out. Here, you come right here—" leading Arla to the kitchen table, pushing her into a chair, drawing another chair close, sitting down. She imprisoned Arla's hands in a hot, moist clasp.

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"I was mad, that's true, I was fit to —well, the more I thought about you jumping up in the middle of the night and slapping me out of a sound sleep—"

Better slap than what I was first thinking of doing—

"—why, I realized you were just taking out your heart-sick jealousy over Roger. Now you needn't deny it, Arla, it's plain as day you're crazy about him. And when I moved in with you and he went for me in such a big way. Well, be honest, honey, can Helen-girl help it if she's, well, you know, curvy 'n sexy. I face it, I don't deserve any credit, God makes us what we are—"

God has nothing to do with what you're trying to—

"So Roger and I, well, that's life, boy-girl, girl-boy always the twain shall meet—" Giggle, giggle, then serious, hand-patting-squeezing-sweaty, *It's like being caught in a vise of hot butter, it melts yet it's all over you.*

"When Roger and I get married, you'll feel better and then you can relax," Helen finally said. She released Arla's hand, her large brown eyes narrowing as she examined Arla's face for reaction. "That ought to be real soon," she said for extra emphasis. Immediately she lunged forward, scrabbling at Arla's tight shoulders. "There, cry on Helen's shoulder. Dear, I sympathize with how you feel, I know how it would be if the shoe was on the other foot. Now, listen, Helen will mix up some biscuits and fry some of that ham we've got, you need food in you, some day you'll find somebody, Mr. Right—a lot of men go big for that, uh, well *delicate* way you've got. You just cry it out, honey."

Arla was tearless.

She got up, went to the bathroom, turned on the water in the basin full blast, and threw up as quietly as she could. The verse born in her troubled mind the night before crept back: *Bitter vetch, that wormwood wot, Is this fair maid—*

When she came into the hall, Helen was talking to Roger on the telephone. "Oh, really?" she was saying, her mouth pursed as though something sweet had an unexpected sour center. "Well, the poor little thing, I'm glad she felt well enough this morning to kid around." With satisfaction. "She sure doesn't now. Well, listen, Roger-honey, I'll tell you later—little pitchers, you know. I wanted to call you last night but it was so late and your landlady is so-o-o nasty when I call you in the night, I wanted to just cry and cry on your big ole shoulder. Honest, honey, you may not know it the way I'm always laughing and giving out, but deep inside I'm just terribly, terribly sensitive. All right, about eight, you sweet ole tease—no, she couldn't go out, she feels too bad—"

"I feel fine," Arla said. "Fine!"

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Helen's head whipped around. Then "No, faint! Faint!" she said sharply into the telephone. "I'll have to hang up." She put down the receiver quietly, then glared at Arla.

"You're a liar," Arla said, finally breaking the silence. "A big—fat—mouthy—liar."

In a few moments the doorbell rang insistently. Arla walked stiffly down the hall, flung open the door. Roger stood there. "My God, you're on your feet! But Helen said you fainted. I came to help."

"No," Arla said precisely. "What I said was, I feel fine. I feel fine."

Back of her, Helen began to sob, explosive, air-sucking sobs, watered and snuffled. "Oh, Roger, you'll never believe what she said—after I came back to make up and be h-h-happee!"

"Helen, baby," Roger said, putting his arm around her. "Put your head on daddy's shoulder. Now listen, Arla's a sweet kid, she probably didn't mean anything, did you, Arla? She's just got a flat, funny way of talking. Now, listen, I don't want my two girls to be fighting."

"I want to congratulate you on your coming marriage," Arla said stiffly. "You may eat the ham and biscuits for your engagement supper. I am going out to dinner."

"Hey, what's this?" Roger's hand stopped patting Helen's back. He moved halfway between the two women, looking uncertainly from one to the other. "Whoa, little girl, you're not going to pull a shotgun on us, are you?" Big, boisterous, good-fellow laugh. "Want to get rid of Helen just because you girls are cat-spatting? Well, what do you know, I bet little Arla is jealous. Boy, am I a lucky man—got two pretty girls! You come on over here, honey, and cry on the other shoulder."

Arla longed to do as he said—oh, better than that—to float smilingly, adorably, teasingly to him, put her head on his shoulder, run her fingers up, up, until her arm was around his neck. Then he would kiss her—

"Well, if you're going to turn me down," Roger said with mock ruefulness, "I might as well be going." Helen snuggled closer and sobbed louder. Roger patted her briefly, pulled away, and said, "Well, listen, you kids, you've got your dinner all planned and they're expecting me over at the house. So I'll be back later. Say, how'd it be the three of us head for a movie, then go afterwards to Chinatown for chow mein—"

Helen's mouth looked raw, turned inside out, with renewed sobs.

"I think Helen's feeling faint," Arla said maliciously. "Maybe she should go to bed."

"Say, maybe you're right," Roger said, too quickly. "Yeah. This is probably the wrong night, everybody, well all these— Well, what say we take a rain check on it and

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we'll hit the town this Saturday night, me and my sweethearts. See you!"

He walked hastily down the hall and out the door.

"Oh, dear God, he's gone! You've driven him off with your mean and nasty insinuations." Helen turned, her right arm swung back to deliver a blow.

Arla was already going through the kitchen doorway. Helen ran after her just in time to see Arla take the small ham from the refrigerator, grab a butcher knife, and hack chunks from the bone. She turned on the faucet and the garbage disposal. Helen gasped with the profound shock of a heavy eater seeing good food go to waste, while Arla gazed after the disappearing chunks with bitter satisfaction.

"The funeral meats of a beautiful friendship," she said acidly. She turned to Helen, whose arm was still upraised as though in comic salute. "Wormwood!" Arla said. "For almost a year you have been eating into me like a worm. I said a worm, Helen. I am worm-eaten wood. And you are bitter vetch, Helen. In other words, to me you're poison. Now, you mix poison and worm, and that's a nasty, nasty combination."

She stalked into the bedroom, shut the door, and fell across her bed with her coat still on.

In a few minutes the door was flung open and Helen screamed, "What are you doing in here, what are you—" She let out a loud, horrified gasp. "What have you done to my pillow! You nut! It's full of holes!" Arla raised her head, saw Helen bending over her own bed. "Why, it's stabbed! Full of stabs!"

Full of stabs, whoo-hoo, who's the nut, how can a thing be full of stabs, stabs are slice-thin and leave nothing—but nothing—

"That was my mother's pillowcase, embroidered by her own dear hands—oh, you *are* wicked! Wicked! You were practicing to kill me, I know it, I'm going to call the police!"

Arla turned on her back and blinked at the ceiling, a thin smile on her lips.

"You hear me? The police!"

"Hello, police?" Arla said in high, flat mocking tones. "Please come to my house, my friend just stabbed a pillow. No, I didn't see her do it but there are some holes in an old pillowcase my mother made years ago. I want you to come and arrest her."

"You devil!" Helen gritted. "Book-spouting, pasty-faced, skinny devil!"

"Also I want to report that she scared off my boy friend, and now he won't marry me; she ought to get life for that—"

Helen's hysteria cut her off. "You-nut-why-you've-got-to-be-crazy-talking-like-an-idiot-it-makes no-sense-what's-this-bitter-vetch-worm-stuff-you've flipped-your-lid-that's-it-I'll-tell-Roger-he'll-under-

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stand - how - could - he - help - it - stabbing - pillows - worms - after - all - I've - done - coming - back—"

Arla got up from the bed, went into the closet, felt in the pocket of her robe for her bottle of sleeping tablets. With it clutched tightly in her hand she brushed by the swollen-faced Helen and went to the kitchen. She put water in the teakettle and put it on to boil.

Helen stomped in and angrily pulled it off the flame, "You'll not eat, you're going to listen to me!"

"Put it back," Arla said. "I want a cup of tea. I'll need strength to listen."

Helen sullenly returned the kettle to the flame. Then, angrily flinging her body from stove to sink, she took two tea bags from the cupboard. When the water boiled, she scalded two cups, placed them on the table, put a tea bag in each, then poured boiling water over them.

Arla put sugar in hers, stirred it carefully, tasted it. It was then that the malicious idea struck her. Holding the bottle of capsules on her lap so that the other woman couldn't see what they were, she carefully removed two capsules. Then, "Look, Helen, look!" She held up the large capsules for brief inspection, popped them into her mouth, took a swallow of tea, gulped, then took another swallow to get them down. "Look, you've driven me to it," she said accusingly.

"Poison! Poison!" Helen cried.

"Bitter vetch," said Arla. *Why can't I get that out of my mind, where did it come from, how—*

"Spit it out this instant, you hear, you idiot woman! Oh, why did you get us into this, you started it!"

"I can't," Arla said. She swallowed more tea. "They're down. Now go call the police."

Helen ran to the refrigerator, grabbed a bottle of milk. "Drink this, lots! Oh, God, I can't remember what one does!"

"Well, why don't you call the police?" Arla asked pleasantly. "Tell them it's poison. Like *you* said. Ask them to send—well, I'm sure you'll know what to ask them to send."

One of Helen's wringing hands flung against her mouth, and she bit at its knuckles in desperate dilemma. "I don't want to tell them, I don't want the police to know! A doctor, I'll call a doctor."

"Call Roger," Arla suggested. "Tell him. Perhaps he'll get a doctor for you."

"Yes, yes!" Helen was already at the telephone. Arla watched intently. "Roger, help me! The most terrible thing, Arla's poisoned! Yes, I said poisoned! No, it's not like before, I'm not twisting what she said. Call a doctor, I don't know what doctor, *your* doctor. But you *won't* be a laughingstock. Its true. It *is* poison."

There was a silence. "Strychnine," Helen said. "We had it for rats. In our basement." She whimpered. "That'll help, won't it—

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knowing what kind, they'll know what to do—won't that help? All right, I'll do that."

She hung up, ran back to the kitchen doorway, screeched, "For God's sake, drink some milk, swallow an egg—" She ran back to the telephone, dialed again, began to speak, "Hello, is this the hospital, emergency hospital—"

Arla felt uncomfortably excited. Not in the triumph of witnessing Helen make a complete fool of herself, as she had wanted when the idea struck her. But wound up. Too tight. Nervous. *But I never told her it was poison,* she rehearsed in her mind; *I distinctly said only, Look, you've driven me to it. So I took two sleeping tablets, my own prescription, I've had a bad day, ill, her hysterics.*

Slow, reluctant steps came up the outside stairs to the front entrance. Roger's voice. "Are you sure, Helen? You know how you are, you get carried away. Did you see her, how do you know it was the poison for the rats, was she in the basement?"

A blubbery gasp, "Oh, Roger, she was always making me mad, always—she's sarcastic, Roger! And then last night she was standing over me, I woke up scared into fits, she was slapping me—she was like a fiend, it made me so mad! Oh, I know it was wrong. That's why I came back, after I ran away. But I couldn't find them, they weren't in the drawer where she kept them. And then we all got so excited that I forgot. Won't they forgive me if I forgot, Roger?"

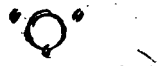
The woman's crazy, she's really crazy—

"What are you jabbering about, make sense, Helen!" Roger shouted.

"I put it in them," Helen whimpered. "The strychnine, in her sleeping capsules."

Arla's mouth dried. As she sprang from her chair a great hand seemed to grasp her throat, tightening, tightening, drawing back her head. She began to breath hard, harder.

When she heard the distant shrilling of a siren her muscles contracted and her shoulders bent toward her hips. The pity was, her mind remained so clear. So comprehending. Well-gathered.



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a PARKER PYNE story by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

Perhaps this was Parker Pyne's strangest adventure in detection . . . His famous ad in The Agony Column—"Are you happy? If not, consult Mr. Parker Pyne"—had brought him many unhappy clients. But none was so unhappy as Mrs. Willard J. Peters during her stay at Delphi—and she had good reason to be unhappy. But leave it to Parker Pyne to arrange matters so that "all's well that ends well" . . .

THE ORACLE AT DELPHI

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

MRS. WILLARD J. PETERS DID NOT really care for Greece. And of Delphi she had, in her secret heart, no opinion at all.

Mrs. Peters' spiritual homes were Paris, London, and the Riviera. She was a woman who enjoyed hotel life, but her idea of a hotel bedroom was a soft-pile carpet, a luxurious bed, a profusion of different arrangements of electric light, including a shaded bedside lamp, plenty of hot and cold water, and a telephone beside the bed, by means of which you could order tea, meals, mineral waters, cocktails, and speak to your friends.

In the hotel at Delphi there were none of these things. There was a marvelous view from the windows, the bed was clean and so was the whitewashed room. There was a chair, a washstand, and a chest of drawers. Baths took place by arrangement and were occasionally disappointing with regard to hot water.

It would, she supposed, be nice to say that you had been to Delphi, and Mrs. Peters had tried hard to take an interest in Ancient Greece, but she found it difficult. Their statuary seemed so unfinished—so lacking in heads and arms and legs. Secretly, she much preferred the handsome marble angel complete with wings which was erected on the late Mr. Willard Peters' tomb.

But all these secret opinions she kept carefully to herself, for fear her son Willard should despise her. It was for Willard's sake that she was here, in this chilly and uncomfortable room, with a sulky maid and a disgusted chauffeur in the offing.

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For Willard (until recently called Junior—a title which he hated) was Mrs. Peters' eighteen-year-old son, and she worshipped him to distraction. It was Willard who had this strange passion for bygone art. It was Willard, thin, pale, spectacled, and dyspeptic, who had dragged his adoring mother on this tour.

They had been to Olympia, which Mrs. Peters thought a sad mess. She had enjoyed the Parthenon, but she considered Athens a hopeless city. And a visit to Corinth and Mycenæ had been agony to both her and the chauffeur.

Delphi, Mrs. Peters thought unhappily, was the last straw. Absolutely nothing to do but walk along the road and look at the ruins. Willard spent long hours on his knees deciphering Greek inscriptions, saying, "Mother, just listen to this! Isn't it splendid?" And he would then read out something that seemed to Mrs. Peters the quintessence of dullness.

This morning Willard had started early to see some Byzantine mosaics. Mrs. Peters, feeling instinctively that Byzantine mosaics would leave her cold (in the literal as well as the spiritual sense), had excused herself.

"I understand, mother," Willard had said. "You want to be alone just to sit in the theater or up in the stadium and look down over it all and let it sink in."

"That's right, pet," said Mrs. Peters.

"I knew this place would get you," said Willard exultantly, and departed.

Now, with a sigh, Mrs. Peters prepared to rise and breakfast.

She came into the dining room to find it empty save for four people. A mother and daughter, dressed in what seemed to Mrs. Peters a most peculiar style (not recognizing the peplum as such), who were discoursing on the art of self-expression in dancing; a plump, middle-aged gentleman who had rescued a suitcase for her when she got off the train and whose name was Thompson; and a newcomer, a middle-aged gentleman with a bald head who had arrived the preceding evening.

This personage was the last left in the breakfast room, and Mrs. Peters soon fell into conversation with him. She was a friendly woman and liked someone to talk to. Mr. Thompson had been distinctly discouraging in manner (British reserve, Mrs. Peters called it), and the mother and daughter had been very superior and highbrow, though the girl had got on rather well with Willard.

Mrs. Peters found the newcomer a very pleasant person. He was informative without being highbrow. He told her several interesting friendly little details about the Greeks, which made her feel much more as though they were real people and not just tiresome history out of a book.

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Mrs. Peters told her new friend all about Willard and what a clever boy he was, and how Culture might be said to be his middle name. There was something about this benevolent and bland personage which made him easy to talk to.

What he himself did and what his name was, Mrs. Peters did not learn. Beyond the fact that he had been traveling and that he was having a complete rest from business (what business?) he was not communicative about himself.

Altogether, the day passed more quickly than might have been anticipated. The mother and daughter and Mr. Thompson continued to be unsociable. They encountered the latter coming out of the museum, and he immediately turned in the opposite direction.

Mrs. Peters' new friend looked after him with a little frown.

"Now, I wonder who that fellow is!" he said.

Mrs. Peters supplied him with the other's name, but could do no more.

"Thompson—Thompson. No, I don't think I've met him before, and yet somehow or other his face seems familiar."

In the afternoon Mrs. Peters enjoyed a quiet nap in a shady spot. The book she took with her to read was not the excellent one on Grecian Art recommended to her by her son, but was, on the contrary, titled *The River Launch Mystery*. It had four murders in it, three abductions, and a large and varied gang of dangerous criminals. Mrs. Peters found herself both invigorated and soothed by the perusal of it.

It was four o'clock when she returned to the hotel. Willard, she felt sure, would be back by this time. So far was she from any presentiment of evil that she almost forgot to open a note which the proprietor said had been left for her by a strange man during the afternoon.

It was an extremely dirty note. Idly she ripped it open. As she read the first few lines, her face blanched and she put out a hand to steady herself. The handwriting was foreign but the language employed was English.

LADY (it began),—This to hand to inform you that your son is being held captive by us in place of great security. No harm shall happen to honored young gentleman if you obey orders of yours truly.

We demand for him ransom of ten thousand English pounds sterling.

If you speak of this to hotel proprietor or police or any such person your son will be killed.

This is given you to reflect. Tomorrow directions in way of paying money will be given. If not obeyed the honored young gentleman's ears will be cut off and sent you. And following day if still not obeyed he will be killed. Again this is not idle threat. Let the Kyria reflect and—above all—be silent.

DEMETRIUS THE BLACK BROWED

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It would be idle to describe the poor lady's state of mind. Preposterous and childishly worded as the demand was, it yet brought home to her a grim atmosphere of peril. Willard, her boy, her pet, her delicate, serious Willard.

She would go at once to the police; she would rouse the neighborhood. But perhaps, if she did—She shivered.

Then, rousing herself, she went out of her room in search of the hotel proprietor—the sole person in the hotel who could speak English.

"It is getting late," she said. "My son has not returned yet."

The pleasant little man beamed at her. "True. Monsieur dismissed the mules. He wished to return on foot. He should have been here by now, but doubtless he has lingered on the way." He smiled happily.

"Tell me," said Mrs. Peters abruptly, "have you any bad characters in the neighborhood?"

Bad characters was a term not embraced by the little man's knowledge of English. Mrs. Peters made her meaning plainer. She received in reply an assurance that all around Delphi there were very good, very quiet people—all well disposed toward foreigners.

Words trembled on her lips, but she forced them back. That sinister threat tied her tongue. It might be the merest bluff. But suppose it wasn't? A friend of hers in America had had a child kidnaped, and on her informing the police, the child had been killed. Such things did happen.

She was nearly frantic. What was she to do? Ten thousand pounds—what was that to her in comparison with Willard's safety? But how could she obtain such a sum? There were endless difficulties just now as to the withdrawing of cash. A letter of credit for a few hundred pounds was all she had with her.

Would the bandits understand this? Would they be reasonable?

When her maid came to her, she dismissed the girl fiercely. A bell sounded for dinner, and the poor lady was driven to the dining room. She ate mechanically. She saw no one. The room might have been empty as far as she was concerned.

With the arrival of fruit a note was placed before her. She winced, but the handwriting was entirely different from that which she had feared to see—a neat, clerkly English hand. She opened it without much interest, but she found its contents intriguing:

At Delphi you can no longer consult the Oracle (so it ran), but you *can* consult Mr. Parker Pyne.

Below that was a clipping of an advertisement pinned to the paper, and at the bottom of the sheet a passport photograph was attached. It was the photograph of her bald-headed friend of the morning.

Mrs. Peters read the newspaper clipping twice.

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Are you happy? If not, consult Mr. Parker Pyne.

Happy? Had any one ever been so *un*happy? . . . It was like an answer to prayer.

Hastily she scribbled on a loose sheet of paper she happened to have in her bag:

Please help me. Will you meet me outside the hotel in ten minutes?

She enclosed it in an envelope and directed the waiter to take it to the gentleman at the table by the window. Ten minutes later, enveloped in a fur coat, for the night was chilly, Mrs. Peters went out of the hotel and strolled slowly along the road to the ruins. Mr. Parker Pyne was waiting for her.

"It's just the mercy of heaven you're here," said Mrs. Peters breathlessly. "But how did you guess the terrible trouble I'm in? That's what I want to know."

"The human countenance, my dear madam," said Mr. Parker Pyne gently. "I knew at once that *something* had happened, but what it is I am waiting for you to tell me."

Out it came in a flood. She handed him the letter, which he read by the light of his pocket torch.

"H'm," he said. "A remarkable document. A most remarkable document. It has certain points—"

But Mrs. Peters was in no mood to listen to a discussion of the finer points of the letter. What was she to do about Willard? Her own dear, delicate Willard.

Mr. Parker Pyne was soothing. He painted an attractive picture of Greek bandit life. They would be especially careful of their captive, since he represented a potential gold mine. Gradually he calmed her down.

"But what am I to *do?*" wailed Mrs. Peters.

"Wait till tomorrow," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "That is, unless you prefer to go straight to the police."

Mrs. Peters interrupted him with a shriek of terror. Her darling Willard would be murdered!

"You think I'll get Willard back safe and sound?"

"There is no doubt of that," said Mr. Parker Pyne soothingly. "The only question is whether you can get him back without paying ten thousand pounds."

"All I want is my boy."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Parker Pyne calmly. "Who brought the letter, by the way?"

"A man the landlord didn't know. A stranger."

"Ah! There are possibilities there. The man who brings the letter tomorrow might be followed. What are you telling the people at the hotel about your son's absence?"

"I haven't thought."

"I wonder, now." Mr. Parker Pyne reflected. "I think you might quite naturally express alarm and concern at his absence. A search party could be sent out."

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"You don't think these fiends—?" She choked.

"No, no. So long as there is no word of the kidnaping or the ransom, they cannot turn nasty. After all, you can't be expected to take your son's disappearance with no fuss at all."

"Can I leave it all to you?"

"That is my business," said Mr. Parker Pyne.

They started back toward the hotel again but almost ran into a burly figure.

"Who was that?" asked Mr. Parker Pyne sharply.

"I think it was Mr. Thompson."

"Oh!" said Mr. Parker Pyne thoughtfully.

Mrs. Peters felt as she went to bed that Mr. Parker Pyne's idea about the letter was a good one. Whoever brought it *must* be in touch with the bandits. She felt consoled, and fell asleep much sooner than she could ever have believed possible.

When she was dressing the following morning she suddenly noticed something lying on the floor by the window. She picked it up—and her heart missed a beat. The same dirty, cheap envelope, the same hated characters. She tore it open.

Good morning, lady. Have you made reflections? Your son is well and unharmed—so far. But we must have the money. It may not be easy for you to get this sum, but it has been told us that you have with you a necklace of diamonds. Very fine stones. We will be satisfied with that, instead.

Listen, this is what you must do. You, or anyone you choose to send must take this necklace and bring it to the Stadium. From there go up to where there is a tree by a big rock. Eyes will watch and see that only one person comes. Then your son will be exchanged for necklace.

The time must be tomorrow six o'clock in the morning just after sunrise. If you put police on us afterwards we shoot your son as your car drives to station.

This is our last word, lady. If no necklace tomorrow morning your son's ears sent you. Next day he die.

With salutations, lady,

DEMETRIUS

Mrs. Peters hurried to find Mr. Parker Pyne. He read the letter attentively.

"Is this true," he asked, "about a diamond necklace?"

"Absolutely. A hundred thousand dollars my husband paid for it."

"Our well-informed thieves," murmured Mr. Parker Pyne.

"What's that you say?"

"I was just considering certain aspects of the affair."

"My word, Mr. Pyne, we haven't got time for aspects. I've got to get my boy back."

"But you are a woman of spirit, Mrs. Peters. Do you enjoy being

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bullied and cheated? Do you enjoy giving up your diamonds meekly to a set of ruffians?"

"Well, of course, if you put it like that!" The woman of spirit in Mrs. Peters wrestled with the mother. "How I'd like to get even with them—the cowardly brutes! The very minute I get my boy back, Mr. Pyne, I shall set the whole police of the neighborhood on them, and, if necessary, I shall hire an armored car to take Willard and myself to the railway station!" Mrs. Peters was flushed and vindictive.

"Ye-es," said Mr. Parker Pyne. "You see, my dear madam, I'm afraid they know that once Willard is restored to you nothing will keep you from setting the whole neighborhood on the alert. Which leads one to suppose they have prepared for that move."

"Well, what do you want to do?"

Mr. Parker Pyne smiled. "I want to try a little plan of my own." He looked round the dining room. It was empty and the doors at both ends were closed. "Mrs. Peters, there is a man I know in Athens—a jeweler. He specializes in good artificial diamonds—first-class stuff." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I'll get him by telephone. He can get here this afternoon, bringing a good selection of stones with him."

"You mean?"

"He'll extract the real diamonds and replace them with paste replicas."

"Why, if that isn't the cleverest thing I've ever heard of!" Mrs. Peters gazed at him with admiration.

"Sh, not so loud. Will you do something for me?"

"Surely."

"See that nobody comes within earshot of the telephone."

Mrs. Peters nodded.

The telephone was in the manager's office. He vacated it obligingly, after having helped Mr. Parker Pyne to obtain the number. When the manager emerged from his office he found Mrs. Peters outside.

"I'm just waiting for Mr. Parker Pyne," she said. "We're going for a walk."

"Oh, yes, madam."

Mr. Thompson was also in the hall. He came toward them and engaged the manager in conversation.

Were there any villas to be let in Delphi? No? But surely there was one near the hotel.

"That belongs to a Greek gentleman, monsieur. He does not let it."

"And there are no other villas?"

"There is one belonging to an American lady. That is the other side of the village. It is shut up now. And there is one belonging to an English gentleman, an artist—that is on the cliff edge looking down to Itéa."

Mrs. Peters broke in. Nature had given her a loud voice and she purposely made it louder. "Why," she said, "I'd just adore to have a villa here! So unspoiled and natural. I'm simply crazy about the place, aren't

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you, Mr. Thompson? But of course you must be if you want a villa. Is it your first visit here? You don't say so."

She ran on determinedly till Mr. Parker Pyne emerged from the office. He gave her just the faintest smile of approval.

Mr. Thompson walked slowly down the steps and out into the road, where he joined the highbrow mother and daughter, who seemed to be feeling the cold wind on their exposed arms.

All went well. The jeweler arrived just before dinner in a car full of other tourists. Mrs. Peters took her necklace to his room. He grunted approval. Then he spoke in French.

"Madame peut être tranquille. Je reussirai." He extracted some tools from his little bag and began to work.

At eleven o'clock Mr. Parker Pyne tapped on Mrs. Peters' door. "Here you are!"

He handed her a little chamois bag. She glanced inside.

"My diamonds!"

"Hush. Here is the necklace with the paste ones replacing the diamonds. Pretty good, isn't it?"

"Simply wonderful."

"Aristopoulos is an ingenious fellow."

"You don't think they'll suspect?"

"Why should they? They know you have the necklace with you. You hand it over. How can they suspect the trick?"

"Well, I think it's wonderful," Mrs. Peters reiterated, handing the necklace back to him. "Will you take it to them? Or is that asking too much of you?"

"Certainly I will take it. Just give me the letter, so that I have the directions clear. Thank you. Now, good night and *bon courage*. Your boy will be with you tomorrow for breakfast."

"Oh, if only that's true!"

"Now, don't worry. Leave everything in my hands."

Mrs. Peters did not spend a good night. When she slept, she had terrible dreams—dreams in which bandits in armored cars fired off a fusillade at Willard, who was running down the mountain in his pajamas.

She was thankful to wake. At last came the first glimmer of dawn. Mrs. Peters got up and dressed. She sat—waiting.

At seven o'clock there came a tap on her door. Her throat was so dry she could hardly speak.

"Come in," she said.

The door opened and Mr. Thompson entered. She stared at him. Words failed her. She had a sinister presentiment of disaster. And yet his voice when he spoke was completely natural and matter-of-fact. It was a rich, bland voice.

"Good morning, Mrs. Peters," he said.

"How dare you, sir! How dare you—"

"You must excuse my unconven-

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tional visit at so early an hour," said Mr. Thompson. "But you see, I have a matter of business to transact."

Mrs. Peters leaned forward with accusing eyes. "So it was you who kidnaped my boy! It wasn't bandits at all!"

"It certainly wasn't bandits. Most unconvincingly done, that part of it, I thought. Inartistic, to say the least."

Mrs. Peters was a woman of a single idea. "Where's my boy?" she demanded, with the eyes of an angry tigress.

"As a matter of fact," said Mr. Thompson, "he's just outside the door."

"Willard!"

The door was flung open. Willard, sallow and spectacled and distinctly unshaven, was clasped to his mother's heart. Mr. Thompson stood looking benignly on.

"All the same," said Mrs. Peters, suddenly recovering herself and turning on him, "I'll have the law on you for this. Yes, I will."

"You've got it all wrong, mother," said Willard. "This gentleman rescued me."

"Where were you?"

"In a house on the cliff point. Just a mile from here."

"And allow me, Mrs. Peters," said Mr. Thompson, "to restore your property."

He handed her a small packet loosely wrapped in tissue paper. The paper fell away and revealed the diamond necklace.

"You need not treasure that other little bag of stones, Mrs. Peters," said Mr. Thompson, smiling. "The real stones are still in the necklace. The chamois bag contains some excellent imitation stones. As your friend said, Aristopoulos is quite an ingenious fellow."

"I just don't understand a word of all this," said Mrs. Peters faintly.

"You must look at the case from my point of view," said Mr. Thompson. "My attention was caught by the use of a certain name. I took the liberty of following you and your bald-headed friend out of doors and I listened—I admit it frankly—to your exceedingly interesting conversation. I found it remarkably suggestive, so much so that I took the manager into my confidence. He made a note of the number to which your plausible friend telephoned and he also arranged that a waiter should listen to your conversation in the dining room this morning.

"The whole scheme worked out very clearly. You were being made the victim of a couple of clever jewel thieves. They know all about your diamond necklace; they follow you here; they kidnap your son, and write the rather comic 'bandit' letter, and they arrange that you shall confide in the chief instigator of the plot.

"After that, all is simple. The good gentleman hands you a bag of imitation diamonds and—clears out with his pal. This morning, when

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your son did not appear, you would be frantic. The absence of your friend would lead you to believe that he too had been kidnaped. I gather that they had arranged for someone to go to the villa tomorrow. That person would have discovered your son, and by the time you and he had put your heads together you might have got an inkling of the plot. But by that time the villains would have got an excellent start."

"And now?"

"Oh, now they are safely under lock and key. I arranged for that."

"The villain," said Mrs. Peters, wrathfully remembering her own trustful confidences. "The oily, plausible villain!"

"Not at all a nice fellow," agreed Mr. Thompson.

"It beats me how you got on to it," said Willard admiringly. "Pretty smart of you."

The other shook his head deprecatingly. "No, no," he said. "When you are traveling incognito and hear your own name being taken in vain—"

"Mrs. Peters stared at him. "Who are you?" she demanded abruptly.

"I am Mr. Parker Pyne," explained that gentleman.

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The author, Alan K. Young, is a former junior-college English instructor, with a B.A. in English from Harvard and an M.A. in the same subject from the University of California (impressive credentials, indeed). At the time Mr. Young wrote "Letter from Mindoro," he was 39, single, and living in California (though a native of Pennsylvania, born and raised in a suburb of Pittsburgh). He has tried his hand "at a goodly cross-section of those jobs in which English majors who don't write The Great American Novel so often wind up"—editor, a stint in the Army, motion-picture photographer, teacher, to name a few. His interests include reading ("especially mysteries and poetry"), the movies and the theater, traveling, sports (especially "back-packing with friends into the High Sierra"), and "above all else," writing.

How can this man miss if he but persist?

LETTER FROM MINDORO

by ALAN K. YOUNG

She could not, Ponsonby surmised, be much beyond her early twenties. She was tall, taller by several inches than Ponsonby himself, with a figure that barely reached the far side of skinny, a complexion just beyond pallor. Her eyes were blue and startlingly clear, and her hair—rather the worse, just now, for the rain—was jet-black and fell straight to her shoulders.

"Good lord, child, you're soaking wet!" Ponsonby stepped away quickly from the open doorway, waving her past him into the warmly lit hall. Closing the door briskly against the cold October drizzle, he led the way to his study, his mind meanwhile probing anxiously through half a century of campus life for her identity. Almost certainly she was old Sandborn's daughter—hadn't she stared moon-eyed at him from the front row of his English 90 class a few years back? But what was her name? Margaret? Martha?

"Marcia," she said. "Marcia Sandborn."

He insisted on taking her coat

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and drawing her chair up to the fire and having her remove her shoes and stretch her feet out toward the blaze. Now he wondered if he should pour her a brandy—did young ladies drink brandy nowadays?

Her apology forestalled the offer. "I hope this isn't too much of an intrusion, Professor Ponsonby, coming here so late and unannounced and all. It's just that Daddy always thought so much of you and said you were so smart, and I didn't know where else to turn."

In spite of her gangly height, her awkwardly long, black-stockinged legs stretched out toward the fire, she suddenly seemed to be very small and damp and woebegone.

"When a charming young lady drops in unexpectedly on a lonely septuagenarian, my dear, it isn't an intrusion, it's a godsend." There now—a rather neatly turned phrase if he did say so himself! Though hardly surprising after forty years of trying to awaken callous undergraduates to the splendors of their mother tongue.

But the gallantry, he noticed, had failed to cheer her. "Come now, my dear, what can be so distressing in your young life to bring you out on a fierce, unhappy night like this?"

"It's a letter, Professor. A letter my father wrote to me from Mindoro just before he—"

Ponsonby reprieved her from the end of the sentence. "Your father's death was a grievous loss to us all. He was an outstanding archeologist, a brilliant teacher, and a fine man."

"Thank you," she said softly. "Are you familiar with the circumstances of his death, Professor?"

"Only that he died of a heart attack while on an archeological expedition to a remote South Pacific island."

"On Mindoro, yes. He'd had two attacks before and he was never supposed to be without his pills, but he'd gone off with only half a bottle and had let himself run out. Then their fourth week on the island he had a chest pain again—it was only a twinge, this time, he said, and he was just going to ignore it; but Tommy and Claude persuaded him that he ought to see the dctor, just in case, so they set off toward opposite ends of the island to try to find him. There's only one doctor on Mindoro, you see, and they had no way of knowing where he'd be. Claude finally found him in Hugoville, but by the time they got back to the excavation—"

Ponsonby waited in silence while she rummaged about in the oversized handbag propped against her chair, finding first her handkerchief and, ultimately, her composure. Then, gently, he prompted her: "But your father did write to you before he died?"

"He must have barely had time to finish the letter before the final attack, Professor. Tommy and

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Claude were gone about two hours, you see, and they got back to camp at the same time and found him slumped over the packing case he used as a desk. His forehead was resting on the letter and the pen was still in his hand. It must have been over very quickly, the doctor says. A massive attack, he called it. He says Daddy couldn't have known—but if only I'd been there!"

This time it took her considerably longer to stop the tears. Ponsonby sat quietly, watching the firelight dance its fitful jig across the book-lined wall behind her, the big leather chair she sat in, and the tear-streaked face she finally raised, plaintively, toward his.

"But Professor it's—it just doesn't make sense! You knew Daddy—he wasn't pompous or stilted or anything like that, and he didn't trick up his speech with a lot of French phrases or fancy words, and—and this letter just doesn't sound like him at all! It calls me '*mon cherie*' and it asks me to get my Uncle Elmer to see that Claude gets paid for his work on the expedition when my Uncle Elmer lives in the East and doesn't even have any connection with the University. And then there's the things it says about Tommy—I can't believe Daddy could feel that way about Tommy, no matter what he'd done. And I don't care what Claude says or the letter either—I just can't believe that Tommy would steal from their supplies!"

"Your father's letter accuses one of his colleagues of stealing?"

"Not exactly, no. But in his letter Daddy is obviously mad at Tommy, and Claude says it was because he'd caught Tommy selling their staples—canned goods, cigarettes, things like that—on the native black market. Only Tommy says it was Claude that Daddy caught stealing, and that if Claude claims it was him once more he's going to bash his face in."

"Good heavens," murmured Ponsonby. "Just who are Claude and Tommy?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Professor, but I forgot that you're sort of out of touch since you retired. Tommy—Tommy Warbow, that is—and Claude Morgan are both graduate students in archeology. Tommy was Daddy's assistant last year on the University's expedition to Mexico, and this year Daddy had planned to take him to Mindoro. Then last spring Claude asked if *he* could go to Mindoro as Daddy's assistant, and—well, Claude had been dating me quite a bit, you see, and I guess Daddy thought he might be refusing his future son-in-law if he said no, so he got them to agree to do without some of the camp luxuries and that way he was able to take them both."

"I see. But in this matter of the theft of the expedition's supplies, your father's letter, I take it, tends to support Claude's accusations rather than Tommy's?"

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"Yes"—it was, Ponsonby noted, a very small 'yes'—"but Tommy insists it was Claude that Daddy really was mad at. He says Claude must have slipped back to camp and written the letter himself or somehow forced Daddy to write it."

"Do you think that's possible?"

"I just don't know what to think, Professor! The letter *is* in Daddy's handwriting, I'm sure of that, and I can't believe that anyone could have forced him to write it, not if it was going to hurt me. But it's the things he says and the way he says them that—well, it just doesn't *sound* like Daddy!"

"May I see the letter, please?"

Marcia rummaged in her handbag for a moment, finally extracting and handing across to him a single, obviously much-handled sheet of airmail stationery. The letter was written in ink in a highly legible hand, with here and there a group of words heavily underscored. Ponsonby read it through silently:

"My darling Marcia:

"I doubt that you will ever see this letter. Indeed, I hope you do not. It is, simply, a precaution. I have had a slight recurrence of those pains in my chest—nothing to be alarmed about, I'm sure, nothing at all like the last time; but while I've been sitting here waiting for the boys to bring back the doctor, it has occurred to me that if anything *should* happen to me on this expedition, I would regret very much not having passed on to you my thoughts on Claude Morgan and Tom Warbow. I believe that both of them would like to marry you, and I am convinced that one of them loves you truly. And if a girl would know where her true love lies, may *she ask a father!*

"As to Claude, if *he* desires to marry you, then let him, my darling. I doubt not his affections with regard to you—he squared with me on that subject just yesterday. If he has told you of his love for you, his countenance must have been something to see. Also, I would like him to be commended to your Uncle, to be paid in full for all that he has done on this expedition.

"But as to young Tom, I only hope that I may live long enough to be his undertaker. He is an audacious knave and his cunning is great, but I know you to be apprehensive, my darling, and well able to handle him. I am confident that time will censure him, that he will one day be doomed by his own character. Until then, if he approaches you, oh clip him, my dearest, clip him for me!

"As I have said, Marcia, I doubt that you will ever see this letter. But if anything should happen to me, one of the boys will find it among my papers and bring it to you. If that happens, please, *please* do not take my advice lightly: I want you to *find a substitute father, mon cherie,* and to go on from there to find a loving husband.

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"All my love my darling,
Daddy."

Ponsonby read the letter through again, then lowered it slowly to his lap. "A most intriguing letter," he said.

A shadow passed almost imperceptibly across Marcia's face. "Then you don't think Daddy could have been delirious, or something like that, Professor?"

"And still have been physically able to write this letter? I think not, my dear. No, I think your father was very much in command of his faculties when he wrote this. Indeed, knowing him as I did, I wouldn't be surprised if he had started this as—well, as a kind of intellectual exercise. Or perhaps he had a premonition that this would be his last chance to tell you what was on his mind."

"But I still don't understand!"

"Apart from archeology, my dear, what were your father's interests? His hobbies, the books he read outside his field, that sort of thing."

"Oh, he liked to fish, deep-sea fishing especially, and he painted a little, mostly water colors. And he loved good literature, particularly Shakespeare. He liked poetry, and he read mysteries by the dozen, and sometimes he would just sit down and read the dictionary the way somebody else might read a magazine. But he especially loved Shakespeare. Some of the plays I think he knew almost by heart."

"You say he read the dictionary. Was he interested in etymology, then, and in semantics? In the origin and history of words and in their meanings?"

"I think so."

"Did he ever do word games? Cryptograms, anagrams, things like that."

"Oh, yes. He loved doing those horrible cross-things they have in the literary magazines. But what's that got to do with his letter, Professor?"

"I believe your father wrote this letter in code, my dear—a clever code which he apparently devised before his final attack. I would like to think he *hoped* you would bring this letter to me."

"In code? But why?"

"I think that will become clear if you could let me have half an hour with a few of my books. It will mean keeping you out rather late —"

"Oh, *please*, Professor! I've got to know what it means!"

For the next half hour Marcia sat quietly, her long legs tucked up under her, her gaze mesmerized by the dancing flames, while Ponsonby busied himself at his desk, rifling through the pages of half a dozen books, from time to time emitting grunts of obvious satisfaction. When at last he rose and crossed the study to stand before the hearth, the campus clock in Memorial Tower was gently dropping the last faint notes of midnight.

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"I'm certain of it now, my dear," he said, smiling down at Marcia. "Your father's letter *is* in code, and the key to that code is hidden in the two groups of words he underlined—*she ask a father* in the first paragraph, and *find a substitute father, mon cherie,* in the last. Now, our first obvious assumption is that the second underlined group refers to the first, and that your father wanted you to substitute some other word for the word *father* in the earlier phrase. A clue to the substitute he had in mind lies in the fact that he also—uncharacteristically, as you have pointed out—used the French phrase, *mon cherie*. Now, the French word for *father* is, of course, *père*. So if we substitute the *père* for *father* in the first underlined phrase, we get *she ask a père*."

Ponsonby held up a hand to forestall her bewilderment from finding voice. "Obviously," he continued hastily, "the phrase, *she ask a père,* can have significance for us only if we assume it to be a code. And indeed, that's just what it is, a code of the simplest kind—an anagram. Now then, what do you make of *she ask a père?* It's a single proper noun, mind you, a man's name—"

"An anagram?"

"*Shakespeare,* my dear, *Shakespeare!* It's as plain as the nose on your face. And Shakespeare, of course, is the key to your father's code. No doubt he could have worked the name openly and logically into a last message to you, but perhaps he thought that might be *too* obvious and tip off the wrong person. But let's take the code itself, my dear—tell me, how much do you know about your native language?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. English was never one of my best subjects."

"A failing, I fear, which you share with a great many of your fellow Americans. Too many of us regard our language as a vast army of words whose precise meanings have been determined for all time by the men who write dictionaries, and whose use in sentences, at least for those who wish to speak and write 'properly,' is governed by a set of ironclad grammatical rules. Nonsense, my dear! Poppycock! This old language of ours is a superbly flexible tool which has evolved as our civilization has evolved, growing and stretching and borrowing down through the centuries to meet our needs of the moment, characterized by nothing so much as change. Why, the language we speak today comes to us in a direct line from the Old English of *Beowulf,* twelve centuries ago, yet today's student must approach that poem as if it were in a foreign language. And even the Middle English of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* scarcely more than five hundred years old, is virtually Greek to the man in the street.

"Now Shakespeare's language, of course, is classified as 'Modern Eng-

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lish' and is basically the language we use today—yet it, too, has changed remarkably in the three hundred and fifty years since that worthy trod the boards. There have been hundreds of new words and idioms introduced, and hundreds discarded, and still other hundreds which have changed in meaning. Scholars have various headings by which they classify such semantic changes—specialization and generalization, for example, elevation and degeneration or degradation—but these classifications need not concern us. The important thing, Marcia, is that we recognize that it is on such changes as these that your father based his code."

All the while he had been speaking Ponsonby had stood with his back to the fire, his gaze fixed on a far corner of the room as though he saw again the generations of young faces, worshipping and condescending, attentive and bored, that had stared up at him down the years from the serried ranks of a hundred classrooms. Now he brought his attention back to Marcia.

"I believe, my dear, that the real message your father wanted to leave you is contained in his letter's two middle paragraphs. First of all he writes, *As to Claude, if he desires to marry you, then let him, my darling*. Do you remember, Marcia, that magnificent scene in Act One of *Hamlet* when that unhappy young man first meets his father's ghost? Horatio and Marcellus, you'll recall, try to stop him from following the spirit, but Hamlet will not be stayed. 'My fate cries out,' he says,

'And makes each petty artery in this body
As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.
Still am I call'd. Unhand me gentlemen.
By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!'

"To the Elizabethans, the verb *let* could mean to 'hinder' or 'obstruct' just as readily as it could mean to 'permit.' Thus, when your father writes of Claude, *then let him, my darling,* he means, in terms of his Shakespearean code, just the opposite of what he seems to be saying. Actually, there were two Old English survivals at work here with almost diametrically opposed meanings. One we still use, but the other survives today, for all practical purposes, only as a noun in legal jargon—'without let or hindrance,' as the lawyers say.

"But I digress—where were we now? Oh, yes, your father writes next: *I doubt not his affections with regard to you—he squared with me on that subject just yesterday*. Now to us, Marcia, *affections* are almost invariably fond feelings toward someone, but to the Elizabethans they were, simply, feelings in general, embracing lust as readily as love. That's why the King James Bible, for instance—surely one of

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the great monuments to the Age of Elizabeth—can speak of 'vile affections.'

"And then there's the word *squared*. Surely that rings a bell—a midsummer's night? An enchanted forest? Puck's description of the quarrel between Titania and Oberon?—

'And now they never meet in grove or green,
By fountain clear, or spangled starlight sheen,
But they do square, that all their elves for fear
Creep into acorn-cups and hide them there.'

"To the Elizabethans, to *square* with someone meant to quarrel with him, whereas to us it means—well, to 'come clean' or 'face up to something.' Of course we do have the idiom 'to square off,' but that I believe came into the language later, from the prize ring.

"Now in his next sentence your father writes: *If he has told you of his love for you, his countenance must have been something to see.* Now to us *countenance* generally means simply 'expression' or 'face,' but to Shakespeare it more often meant a 'feigned appearance' or 'pretense.' Isn't it Isabella in *Measure for Measure* who speaks of 'the evil which is here wrapt up in countenance'?

"And finally your father says of Claude: *I would like him to be commended to your Uncle, to be paid in full for all that he has done on this expedition.* Quite clearly, child, your father is here accusing Claude of being the expedition's black marketeer. To Shakespeare the verb *commend* could mean to 'praise' or 'recommend' someone, as it does to us, but it could also mean to 'commit' or 'give in charge.' A cup of poison might be commended to one's lips, for instance, or a traitor commended to his executioner.

"And then there's the word *paid*. Surely you recall that black-humored scene from *Henry IV* in which Falstaff claims to have slain Hotspur—'Turk Gregory ne'er did such deeds in arms as I have done this day. I have paid Percy, I have made him sure.' In short, to the Elizabethan, one could be paid in retaliation for his acts as well as in recompense for them. As a matter of fact, we still use the verb *pay* in this manner, as when someone does us an injustice and we threaten to 'pay him back'."

Throughout the lecture—for it scarcely could be regarded otherwise, Ponsonby reflected uncomfortably—Marcia had never once removed her gaze from his face. "But what about my Uncle Elmer?" she asked now. "I still don't see—"

"I know without asking," interrupted Ponsonby, "that your Uncle Elmer is your only flesh-and-blood uncle, because when your father urged that Claude *be commended to your Uncle,* you thought imme-

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diately of him. But every American, my dear, even one with no flesh and blood relatives at all, has at least one uncle—his Uncle Sam. Mindoro is a United States trust territory, and as such is under Federal jurisdiction. Your father is asking you to lodge a complaint with the United States Marshal for Mindoro, charging Claude with the theft of the expedition's supplies. But I doubt that after this long a time and with only this letter—"

Marcia waved aside his concern. "That doesn't matter, Professor. But I still don't understand why Daddy had to write in code."

"Because, Marcia, your father had no way of knowing that it would be Claude who would find the doctor and bring him back, or that Tommy would return to camp at the same time. Now suppose your father had written a letter which stated openly what he had discovered about Claude, a letter which denounced that young man as a thief and a scoundrel and said in effect: *If he wants to marry you, oppose him in that desire. I don't doubt that he lusts for you—I quarreled with him over his attentions to you just yesterday. But if he has told you he really loves you, his pretense must have been monstrous. Furthermore, I want you to give him in charge to the Federal authorities to be punished for his thievery on this expedition.*

"What would have been the fate of such a letter, even if it had been sealed and addressed to you, if Claude had returned to camp ahead of Tommy and found your father dead? Is he the kind of man who would have hesitated to open the letter and read it and, having read it, to destroy it? Obviously your father thought not, and so he utilized his intimate knowledge of Shakespeare to compose a letter which would seem to praise Claude while actually damning him. He was counting on that young man's vanity being too great to allow him to destroy a letter that seemed to flatter him, however odd it sounded.

"And he was counting on your good sense, my dear, not to accept such a letter at face value. And this was the only way that he could be reasonably sure you would get the letter, don't you see? Even if he had hidden it among his own papers, what assurance had he that Claude wouldn't come upon it first after his death? Even if he had addressed it to Tommy, how could he be certain that Claude—"

"What *about* Tommy, Professor?" she interrupted him, the appeal unmistakable in her voice. "Were the things that Daddy said about him—?"

"Also disguised as to their true meaning? Let's take a look. *As to young Tom*"—Ponsonby glanced again at the letter in his hand—"*I only hope that I may live long enough to be his undertaker.* Now to the Elizabethans an *undertaker*

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was not a mortician, but, rather, someone who undertook something for another. Christians of the period, for instance, often spoke of Christ as their undertaker, and Ben Jonson referred in one of his dedications to his patron as 'my noble and timely undertaker.'

"Next your father writes of Tommy: *He is an audacious knave, and his cunning is great, but I know you to be apprehensive, my darling, and well able to handle him.* Now in this sentence the key words are *audacious, knave, cunning,* and *apprehensive,* all words which since Shakespeare's day have undergone varying degrees of what scholars call 'word degeneration'—that is to say, their meanings are more derogatory today than they were three hundred and fifty years ago. To us audacious implies a contempt for decorum or even law, whereas to the Elizabethan it meant 'intrepid' or 'bold.' A *knave* today is a scoundrel, but to Shakespeare—the same is true of *imp* and *varlet,* by the way—a *knave* was just a boy, although generally one from the lower classes. *Cunning* to us implies underhanded skulduggery, whereas to the Elizabethan it denoted honest 'skill' or 'learning,' so that, indeed, Shakespeare describes 'virtue and cunning' as being 'endowments greater than nobleness and riches.' And finally, to be *apprehensive* today is to fear some adverse happening, but in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries it meant 'perceptive'—what my students would have called 'sharp.' John Heywood, for instance—I confess, my dear, that I had to dredge this one up out of my Oxford English Dictionary—describes his daughter as 'an apt and wittie lasse, apprehensive and well-brayn'd.'

"Then your father continues: *I am confident that time will censure him, that he will one day be doomed by his own character.* Now *censure* and *doom* also are words that have gone downhill since Shakespeare used them. To him, you see, they didn't mean to 'punish' or 'condemn' as they do to us, but merely to 'judge' in an entirely neutral sense. 'Say you consent and censure well the deed'—I think that was Cardinal Beaufort in *Henry VI,* wasn't it? And in *Pericles,* Helicanus says to the nobles of Tyrus, 'Obedient to your dooms'—meaning their decisions, don't you see?—'I will take the crown.'

"And finally your father writes of Tommy: *Until then, if he approaches you, oh clip him, my dearest, clip him for me!* Now to the Elizabethan—"

The peel of the doorbell put a sudden period to Ponsonby's sentence. For a moment he was back in Grinnelle Hall with the bell in Memorial Tower interrupting still another lecture before he had reached his peroration. "Damn all!" he said, and went muttering out of the room.

This time the rain-bedraggled

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creature on his doorstep was a young man. Except for the fact that his blond hair was, to Ponsonby's taste, rather too long, it was difficult to tell just what he looked like. His very red nose was swollen out of proportion to the rest of his face, one blue eye was violently discolored, and one unshaven jaw bulged ominously, as though a large wad of tobacco had been temporarily lodged there.

"Professor Ponsonby? My name is Tom Warbow and I'm looking for Miss Marcia Sandborn. Her landlady said she was coming here."

Ponsonby motioned him inside, peering intently at the battered features. "Young Warbow, is it? And you've been fighting. Over Marcia, I suppose. Well, what about it? Did you whip him?"

The grotesquely unmatched eyes glared belligerently at Ponsonby out of the battered face. "Is she here, Professor?"

"But of course you whipped him! You're here and he's not. 'You have beat him to his camp! You have shown yourself true Hector!'"

"Now look, Professor, I don't want any more trouble, but if Marcia thinks she's going to go home with that—that gigolo!"

Suddenly Ponsonby stepped to one side and with a broad sweep of his arm indicated the open doorway to the study. "'Enter the city,'" he declaimed in stentorian tones:

"'. . . clip your wives, your friends,
Tell them your feats, whilst they with joyful tears
Wash the congealment from your wounds, and kiss
The honour'd gashes whole'."

Warbow stared at him open-mouthed.

"*Antony and Cleopatra,* my boy," said Ponsonby heartily. "Act four, Scene eight, if I'm not mistaken."

"What the devil—?"

"To *clip,* don't you see, to the Elizabethans, meant 'to clasp with the arms'."

"What?"

"To embrace!"

"But I don't—"

"To hug, you ninny, to *hug!*" And so saying, Ponsonby gave the startled young man a mighty shove toward the warmly beckoning doorway at the end of the hall.

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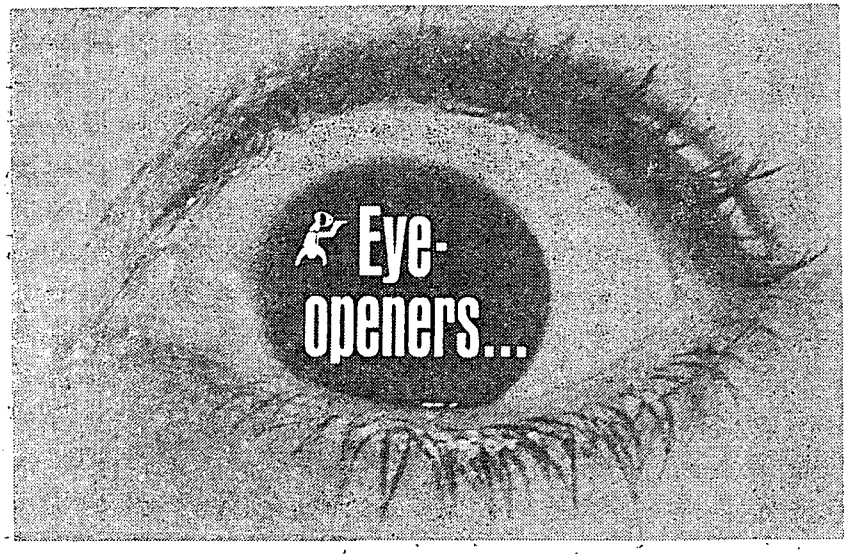

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DOUBLEDAY

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THE OLD LADY SHOWS HER PREJUDICES

by LENORE GLEN OFFORD

Torture and sex, torture and sex,
Books have us steeped in them up to our necks:
Beds, and devices that lead to the mortu'ry,
Sexy and torturey, sexy and torturey.

Give me a novel where true love can burgeon
For a gent and a nice unseduceable virgin,
Where all of the horrors a character has to risk
Are not detailed, but implied by an asterisk.

Out with the language no lady can pardon,
In with the scenes in the vicarage garden.
Down with the agonies—why keep parading them?
Up with the hero who's good at evading them!

Think you can't sell without torture and sex?
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(along with many others whom I love)

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ODDS BODKINS AND THE DUKE'S DIVORCE

by RICHARD CURTIS

IT ALWAYS DISMAYS ME TO HEAR OF domestic troubles among the nobility, but it was especially disturbing to learn of marital strife in the house of Redmeadow. I'd fought under the father and had watched the young Duke, Robert, grow into the very image of the old lion. The Duchess was, if you'll pardon the liberty, a smashing beauty, and I thought it would be a pity if this elegant couple were unable to reconcile their differences.

My day was always made brighter by the appearance of Robert in my shop, which was located near the placid square where Redmeadow House stood. Though most noble and gentlepeople disdain to enter a bookmaker's shop, preferring to transact their business discreetly over the telephone, Robert liked to pay personal calls on me. He thought it more democratic, after the fashion of our age, and I suppose he liked my company.

He would stride in two or three times every week, usually around one in the afternoon, and since I would never permit him to place a bet over the counter like a commoner, I'd arrange for a clerk in the front office to signal me at his arrival. I would open the door of my back room and Robert would pass through, his handsome figure filling my little cubicle. We would exchange pleasantries for a few moments, and sometimes he would even solicit my views on some thorny political question.

Then he would slip twenty or thirty pounds into my breast pocket and murmur, "I think Monsoon looks attractive in the sixth at Ascot," or "I should imagine Redoubtable will take the fourth at Aintree without exerting himself." Then he would pat me, friendly-like, on the shoulder, pivot and cross the front office like a military officer. Our humble headquarters always seemed a bit duller for the rest of the day after Robert had left.

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I'd applauded Robert's choice of Angela Hornsby for a bride. Those who knew her said she was just what he needed to curb his squandering of the modest patrimony the old Duke had bestowed on him. You may think it a trifle balmy that I would want Robert to practice economy, being as how I had waxed quite well-off on the money he invariably lost gambling in my shop. But I hope that shows you there are a few of us in this profession who do not have the morals of a shark. I put Robert's welfare above my own crass interests, wanting nothing more than to see him enter some respectable enterprise and bring honor upon the illustrious House of Redmeadow. Besides, I hadn't the slightest doubt in the world that he would prove too weak to break his gambling habit, and that a few months after his wedding he'd be back in the shop of Godfrey ("Odds") Bodkins, Turf Accountant.

And that's just what happened, actually. Of course, the first time he reappeared I protested strenuously that he might ruin himself, but he merely chided me for my concern. One doesn't presume to tell a nobleman how to run his life, especially one as headstrong as Robert. I realized that if I discouraged him from placing bets with me he would simply take his custom to one of my colleagues, who are almost without exception as unscrupulous as vipers.

I suppose I should have known that his wife would not long stand for Robert's relapse, but I didn't think she would oppose it so passionately. So it came as a shock to read rumors in the newspapers of the foundering of their matrimonial boat. It angered me particularly to learn that my fellow bookmakers were actually laying odds on the prospects of a divorce—another example of the spread of insolence among the lower classes in these islands.

The bookies were giving three-to-two that within three months Robert and Angela would dissolve their union. Those weasels didn't publish these odds the way they do the odds on horse races and political elections, for (oh, the hypocrisy!) it would have been in bad taste to come right out in the open about it. But if you believed that Angela would not divorce Robert in three months you could take your convictions to any bookie joint in London and get thirty shillings to the pound if you were right.

At first I obstinately refused to take any of the action on the growing scandal. Because of my long and warm association with the Redmeadow family, it was unthinkable that I would vote "no confidence" in that gallant lad. On the other hand, it's a keystone of my philosophy that if people are bent on wagering on an event, it might as well be with me as with some blackguard.

And so as a growing number of

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customers expressed interest in the matter, I began to yield to the pressure. I decided to accept a limited number of bets from customers whom I could rely on never to reveal to Robert that I was, in effect, betraying him.

I saw that I might get an advantage over my colleagues by virtue of my association with the Duke and with the members of his servant staff, who also occasioned my shop from time to time. So before laying the same three-to-two odds as everyone else, I thought it would not be unwise to inquire of the servants about the current state of affairs between their master and mistress.

I had my clerk keep an eye out for Mrs. Brocklethrush who shopped for groceries in the vicinity. This somewhat rotund lady would, by shrewd disbursement of the Redmeadow food budget, manage to save a few bob from each shopping tour and slip into my shop to place them on the nose of this horse or that, usually the wrong one. Since she hadn't received her wages in the impecunious Redmeadow house for two years, I would out of sympathy tout her onto reasonably sure bets and win her a bit of spending money from time to time. So she owed me some favors, and I thought it a good time to call them.

My clerk finally spied her and invited her in. She waddled into my back room, filling the air with the aroma of her vegetable basket.

"How odd," she mused, "but I was intending to come by today anyway. I looked at the newspaper today and said to meself, 'Constant Fury looks like a nap in the third at Newmarket.' So I bought a fatty cut of brisket at the butcher's and saved five bob. Their Graces won't know the difference after I smother it in onions. What do you think, Mr. Bodkins?"

She dropped two half crowns into my palm, then collapsed into my desk chair and started fanning herself with a racing form.

"Now, Mrs. Brocklethrush, you know I've never given you a bad tip," I said, "and I'm obliged to inform you that Constant Fury will have a splendid view of Green Apple's hindquarters when the third race is over."

"Do you say so? Green Apple over Constant Fury, ay?"

"Without a doubt," I reaffirmed. "It will pay you five to one." That was a convincing argument, and after thinking about it for a moment she shrugged and consented. Then I leaned over and said, as casually as possible, "I hear there's a spot of trouble in your household."

"Oh, mercy, more than a spot, Mr. Bodkins." Then she put her hand to her mouth. "Actually, I'm not supposed to speak of it. But—" she listened to the clink of her coins in my palm—"I fancy it's no secret."

"Indeed. Then those reports I read—"

"They put it mildly!"

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"Then you would say it looks—?" I put my finger to my throat and made a slicing gesture.

She nodded lugubriously. "But don't let on that I told you."

"Oh, no. You can count on me." Still reassuring her, I ushered the good lady out of my shop. Incidentally, Green Apple did win the third at Newmarket—by four lengths over Mrs. Brocklethrush's Constant Fury, and by various lengths over the other horses.

I went out for lunch and determined, as soon as I returned to the shop, to contact the customers I'd kept on the hook and accept their bets on the divorce. I intended to offer better odds than my colleagues —say, two-to-one—that the Redmeadows would be torn asunder in three months' time.

But when I returned to the shop I was mortified to be told by a clerk that the Duke himself was waiting for me in my office! A wave of terror surged through my innards. I was afraid that Mrs. Brocklethrush had told him I was inquiring about his private affairs, and he had come to thrash me. Luckily, however, I was wrong.

He was perfectly agreeable and bantered with me in the usual way. He pushed a ten-pound note into my breast pocket and mentioned his selection for the seventh race at Newmarket. But then he did a queer thing. Instead of leaving he sat down on the edge of my desk. He took a gold cigarette case out of his jacket and after offering me a smoke (which I didn't mind accepting) said, "I imagine you've heard about the ghastly business I'm involved in."

I looked away. "To be truthful, Your Grace, it would be difficult to avoid hearing it. Disgraceful, I call it, the way those hounds of the press sniff into our most sacred relations." I shook my head woefully. "And what galls me above all," I added pointedly, "is that there's not a word of truth in any of it." Saying this, I scrutinized Robert's face for a reaction.

But he gazed at me steadily, until I began to feel uncomfortable. "You'd really like to know, wouldn't you, Odds?"

"Why, Your Grace, nothing could be further from the truth!"

"Come now," he said sharply, "let's put away our pretenses. I'm perfectly well aware that the bookmakers are laying odds on the possibility of my divorce, and I've no reason to assume you're any different."

"I don't mean to contradict you, sir, but I've steadfastly prohibited even the merest mention of the subject in these precincts."

"Indeed? That's very admirable of you, Odds. But tell me: what is it worth to you to know precisely what my intentions are?"

My jaw fell. I could scarcely believe what I was hearing. "Your Grace, I'm not certain I know what you're suggesting."

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"It's very simple. If you and you alone knew whether or not my wife and I were to divorce, it would put you in a superior position to give or take odds, is that not so?"

"Quite, sir, but to imply that I would ever capitalize on the misfortunes of those who have treated me so decently—assuming it *is* misfortune we're talking about—"

"I'm quite moved by your loyalty, Odds. Nevertheless, what if I were to release you from your loyalty—for a consideration."

"I still don't understand," I said, though in truth understanding was beginning to fill my mind very rapidly now.

"Let me put it to you as clearly as I can. The bookmakers are all in the dark about the status of my marriage. Thus they can only give rather paltry odds that it will be dissolved. But if you knew positively that a divorce was imminent, you could raise your odds from the current three-to-two to, say, three-to-one, or even better. Do you now follow me?"

"Oh, yes, sir, yes indeed."

"Your high odds would attract many betters away from your competitors. And you would be taking no risk at all, because you would know beyond doubt that you were going to win your bets. You could probably take in many thousands of pounds that way—am I correct?"

I spoke with caution. "Assuming one were to do something along those lines, I imagine it could be on the profitable side, yes. Not that many people bet on events like this, but those that do, bet heavily, I've observed."

"How much would a tip be worth to you, then? A tip straight from the horse's mouth, to put it in racing parlance."

I looked at the ceiling and hastily calculated the action. I came to a rough figure based on pledged bets and the prospect of new bets attracted by high odds. But I held this figure back from Robert. "Forgive my forwardness in asking, sir, but perhaps you can put me in the light as to what you're steering towards."

"It should be apparent, Odds. I need money and am willing to sell the information to you."

"I see, sir. And what sum are we contemplating, if I may ask?"

"I put it at two thousand pounds."

I was pleasantly surprised. It wasn't as much as I'd expected him to ask. "I believe it can be arranged. Needless to say, Your Grace, and with no intention of giving offense to you, this information would have to remain strictly *entre nous,* otherwise my advantage over other bookmakers would be destroyed."

The moment I said it I regretted it. The Duke pulled himself up to full stature and glared at me as if I were a rodent. "My dear Bodkins—" he said with suppressed indignation, but before he had a chance to gain momentum I scurried to the safe and withdrew £2000 in cash.

Not deigning to count it, he

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pocketed the bills and said, "Very well. The fact, which all London seems bloodthirstily eager to hear, is that the Duchess and I are definitely going through with our divorce. We are well along. The messy business will be finished in a month—two months at the outside."

"How distressing. Please accept my regrets, Your Grace."

"At least bookmakers and lawmakers will thrive on my catastrophe," he pronounced bitterly, then exited, the customary bounce absent from his gait.

For a few moments I contemplated the sadness of the human condition, but the demands of my profession recalled me to the work at hand. I picked up the telephone and rang up a number of clients to tell them I could offer four-to-one on a Redmeadow divorce. I also phoned a handful of friends and instructed them to spread the word to punters that I was giving exceptional odds.

In the next few days I was flooded with bets. Evidently the populace at large had more faith in the future of the Duke's marriage than we cynical professionals. In any event it was impossible to keep my odds secret. The moment a better hears of a bookie giving good stakes, he goes to his own bookie and demands the same deal. Not only did that happen in my case, but I learned that some of my colleagues were giving even higher odds than I was.

I called my old friend and fellow bookie Tim Tubbs and asked him how he could so confidently offer seven-to-one in favor of a divorce. "Why, Odds," he replied, "everyone knows you're the Duke's personal bookmaker. They reckon that if you raised your odds from three-to-two to four-to-one, you must have gotten some inside dope. Come now, it's true, isn't it? You *know* the Duke's getting divorced, don't you?"

"I'm not saying anything," I growled.

"You don't have to. Your odds speak for themselves."

Naturally, I countered by raising *my* odds over theirs, and the trading, as they say on the security exchange, was lively. But by mutual consent we bookmakers froze the odds at nine-to-one, and there it stayed for a month. The newspapers kept a watchful eye on the activities of the Duke and Duchess, but if the Redmeadows were negotiating a divorce settlement it was undetectable to the most vigilant reporter.

Another month went by. The Duke had not visited my shop since the day I bought his secret from him, and his staff seemed to be avoiding me assiduously, so I was completely ignorant of developments in his household. As the three-month deadline approached, the bookies got restless and began dropping their odds or laying their bets off—that is, they reversed their bets. They wagered with other bookies that there would *not* be a di-

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vorce, so that the money they stood to lose on their pro-divorce wagers would be offset by the money they now stood to gain on their contra-divorce ones.

Well, the third month came and passed, and to all appearances the Duke and Duchess continued to be as married as they'd ever been. I lost more money than I care to talk about, and my colleagues, who took baths for big amounts as well, stopped talking to me. It was one of the lowest points in my career. I even began thinking of getting out of this perilous profession and going into something safe—like politics.

One afternoon who should appear in my shop but Mrs. Brocklethrush. She was looking quite fetching in a new dress and greeted me with twittery cheer. And when she placed a five-pound note in my hand and said, "I like Fortified in the third race at Doncaster," I nearly collapsed.

"Where the devil did you get five blinkin' quid to play on the horses?"

"Why, from me wages."

"Get on," I laughed, "you haven't received wages from the Duke in years."

"I'll 'ave you know the Duke has paid me all me back wages, plus twenty quid interest," she said.

"Blimey, and where has he come into such a windfall?"

"'e wants to tell you 'isself, and asks if you couldn't come by Redmeadow 'ouse at'arf-six."

"Tell His Grace it will be an honor."

Promptly at six thirty I appeared at the door to Redmeadow House, cap in hand, knees somewhat atremble. My old friend Jocko, the butler, admitted me but waved off familiarities and addressed me as Mr. Bodkins. He led me into a high drawing room with a deep blue carpet, heavy furniture upholstered in brocade, and gilt-framed portraits and mirrors. On a velvet chair sat the regal Angela, and beside her, cigarette in hand, stood Robert.

We passed the time of day with a few observations on the weather, but I was deathly uncomfortable. Robert gestured to an armchair, and I lowered myself into it as if there were eggs on the cushion.

"I think we owe you an explanation," he said augustly.

"I beg Your Grace's pardon, but you owe me nothing of the sort."

"No, Odds, we thought it only fair to put you in the picture. You see, it's perfectly true that the Duchess and I were considering divorce. My recklessness with money was bringing us to the verge of ruin. She warned me that if I ever made another bet she would institute divorce proceedings. It was then that I went to you to raise money. I wanted it to pay solicitors' fees."

He looked at the Duchess as if for permission to continue. She nodded serenely.

"During the following week, as you're well aware," His Grace went

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on, "the odds favoring my divorce soared. Suddenly a scheme occurred to me which would, at a stroke, solve all my problems. I therefore took the money you gave me, plus all the funds I could possibly raise, and—"

"Oh, Lord!" I cried, slamming my palm against my brow. "I realize now what you did. You placed bets with all the bookmakers, probably by means of confederates, in favor of your marriage continuing. With odds at nine-to-one you stood to make a fortune. All you had to do was let the Duchess in on your scheme and persuade her to bear with you until the three-month time limit was over."

"Precisely," laughed Robert.

I could feel the hot color spreading up my neck and into my cheeks. What a fool I'd been! "Quite brilliant, Your Grace, I must admit." I turned to the Duchess, who was hardly beaming. "I imagine Your Grace sanctioned this plan?"

She frowned. "I told him it was as fraudulent as the South Sea Bubble," she said with Olympian scorn. "But I love my husband, I revere the institution of marriage, and I have no great love for the bookmakers who had brought us to the verge of ruin. So I was a party to it, yes. But I did insist on one concession."

"Which was, Your Grace—?"

"That he at least repay *you*, Mr. Bodkins. He not only extorted money from you under false pretenses, but he betrayed you as well."

I couldn't catch my breath. "I'm almost beside myself with gratitude for Your Grace's generosity," I said, "but the Duke extorted no money from me. When I paid him for confiding his divorce plans in me, he actually believed there was going to be one. And as for the money I lost betting on a divorce, that is a hazard of my profession. It serves me right for trying to profit from your woes. No, Your Grace, as much of a hardship as it will be, I must decline your extraordinary offer. It is payment enough to see you reunited, and certainly the lesson I've learned is worth the revenue I've lost—I suppose."

"You are a gentleman, Bodkins, but I must insist that you let us reimburse you. Robert must pay this price for making bets against my wishes." She held out a check.

"Take it, Odds," said the Duke. "When I realize how close I came to losing my wife, it's quite easy to part with this money."

"She's a lady of priceless qualities, if you don't mind my saying so. But I must remain steadfast, Your Graces. If I were to accept your refund I would be abandoning the first principle of a bookmaker, which is to be ruthless in victory and stoical in defeat. I'll never forget this kindness, I assure you. You will have a fanatic champion in the city of London as long as Odds Bodkins breathes."

I wheeled—rather smartly, I thought—and concluded my dra-

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matic speech with a hasty exit. I felt immensely proud of myself for having displayed such integrity.

Of course, mingled with my pride was a somewhat cynical analysis of human nature. For although I'd turned down the small fortune they had offered me, I was dead-certain of gaining it anyway—not in a lump sum but a little at a time. In fact, the first installment came rather sooner than I'd expected. When the Duke, who offered to see me to the door, shook hands with me, he pressed five ten-pound notes into my palm and whispered, "Black Thunder looks attractive in the eighth at Ascot, wouldn't you say, Odds?"

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Chase, James Hadley	YOU HAVE YOURSELF A DEAL	Walker & Co.	$3.95	2/14
Creasey, John	THE FAMINE	Walker & Co.	3.95	2/1
Creasey, John	THE PLAGUE OF SILENCE	Walker & Co.	3.95	2/7
Disney, Doris Miles	MONEY FOR THE TAKING	Doubleday & Co.	3.95	2/2
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Woods, Sara	THE CASE IS ALTERED	Harper & Row	4.95	1/31

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She had a shrewd brain and an observant eye and the curiosity of a cat. So when the accident happened in the middle of the night she asked herself: What would Miss Marple or Hildegarde Withers do? Snoop around, of course. And besides, she was a detective's wife . . .

TRAGEDY ON NEW YEAR'S DAY

by LILIAN JACKSON BRAUN

Early New Year's Day

Dear Tom,

Blessed New Year, and may God protect you wherever you are. It's four o'clock in the morning—strange hour for a mother to be writing to her son, but—Tom, dear, I'm so upset! A terrible thing has just happened on the back street behind our apartment! I'm here alone—John is working tonight—and I've just got to talk to somebody.

(Excuse the smudge. There's a *cat* sitting on the table, pawing the paper as I write. Just a stray cat that wandered in. That's part of the story.)

John went on special duty tonight with the Clean-Up Squad, so I curled up on the sofa and read a mystery, and at midnight I opened the window and listened to the horns blowing and the bells ringing. The street looked like a Christmas tree—green lights on the corner gas station—red neon on Wally's Tavern across the street—traffic lights winking. The cars were moving cautiously—we'd had a freezing rain, then more snow—and I said a little prayer that John would get home safely.

After that I put on the pink woolly robe he gave me for Christmas and had a snooze on the sofa, because I'd promised to wait up for him. Every few minutes the sirens would wake me—police cars or ambulances coming in to the hospital on the next block. Then I'd doze off again.

Suddenly a loud noise jolted me awake—like a shot or an explosion—and then I heard a bumping, creaking, crashing, and the sound of shattering glass! It came from the rear of the building.

I ran to the kitchen window and looked out, and there was this black car on the back street—up over the sidewalk—rammed into the brick wall of the warehouse. All the car doors were flung open, and the inside light was on, and a black figure was sprawled out of the driver's seat with his head hanging down in the snow.

I was stunned, but after a moment I came to my senses and telephoned the police. When I went

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back to the window, everything down on the street was ghastly quiet. No one had come running. There were no lights shining out from any of the apartments in our building. And there was this stranger, this man, hanging out of the wrecked car—dead or dying—and nobody cared.

I thought about you, Tom, and how I'd feel if you were helpless and alone like that—and so I went down to him. I grabbed John's hunting jacket—first thing I laid my hands on—and ran down three flights—didn't bother with the elevator—and out the back door and across the street.

When I saw how young he was, I thought my heart would break. He was about your age. His head was covered with blood, and the snow was stained, and I knew he was dead. There was nothing I could do—nothing—but I just couldn't leave him there alone, so I waited and prayed a little—until the blue light from the patrol car flashed into the street.

Then I realized I was standing in the snow in my fuzzy slippers—with a hunting jacket thrown over my pink robe—so I ran back to the building and watched from the doorway.

An officer jumped out of the patrol car and looked at the man in the snow and yelled to his partner, "This one's had it! Better radio for a wagon."

And that's when I saw the cat—a black cat walking through the snow as if his feet hurt. He came to the door and mewed pathetically, and I let him in. Then he started rubbing against my slippers. I picked him up. My, his little feet were like ice! I was shivering, too, so we both came upstairs to get warm.

As I watched from the kitchen window, the ambulance came and they put the body on a stretcher and took it away. I shuddered! He was so young, and I couldn't help thinking of his mother and how the police would wake her in the middle of the night and take her downtown to the morgue.

I wonder who he was. Maybe it will be in the newspaper. I just noticed there are two telephone poles knocked down, too.

I wish John would get home. I'm writing this at the kitchen table. The cat sits here staring into my eyes and then looking at the letter, as if telling me what to write. He's an unusual cat—black as midnight—with empty yellow eyes. They're so deep you can see way down inside them.

That young man—I suppose he had been drinking too much at some New Year's Eve celebration. Maybe he lives in this building. I haven't met any of the neighbors yet. John says some of the tenants are real kooks, and he thinks it's best if we keep to ourselves. This is a run-down neighborhood, but the apartment is comfortable, and the

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rent is low, and it's close to the precinct station.

When John retires next year, we'll get a small house in Northport. I miss our little hometown—don't you?—but I'm happy to be here with John. I never thought I'd be married again—and to a detective! Remember how you and I used to devour those stories about Hercule Poirot and Inspector Maigret?

I think I hear John coming. I'll finish this letter later.

New Year's afternoon

Here I am again! John is having a nap. I told him about the accident, and he said, "Another drunk driver! He was asking for it."

I didn't tell him how I went downstairs in my robe and slippers in the middle of the night (he wouldn't approve), and I had a hard time explaining how I happened to acquire a cat. The kitty is still here—follows me around like a shadow.

There! . . . I just heard it on the radio—first traffic fatality of the year—car rammed into a warehouse after hitting two utility poles—driver's name Wallace Sloan. He lived at 1830 Hamilton, and he was only *twenty-five!* Probably a single man, whooping it up on New Year's Eve. I'm thankful he didn't leave a wife and children.

This morning they towed the wreck away, and now the phone company is fixing the poles. I asked the superintendent of our building if anyone had lost a black kitty, and he didn't know.

Dear son, take care! We think of you constantly and pray that the fighting will end soon and you will be coming home.

Love from Mother

January 4—Wednesday afternoon

Dear Tom,

Glad the fruitcake arrived in good condition. Would you like more? Are they giving you decent food?

Did you get my letter about the accident? Well, I have more news! When John heard the victim's name, he said, "Why, that's the young fellow who owns the tavern across the street." John wasn't very sympathetic. Apparently the tavern is a real dive. John says Wally inherited it from his father a couple of years ago.

The next day I got the newspaper and read the obituaries, and that's when I learned the shocking news. That young man left a wife and four children! My heart went out to his family. I know what it's like to be a widow with a young son to raise, but imagine being left with *four* little ones to bring up. That poor woman!

Tom, you may think this is strange, but—I decided to go to the funeral! Of course, I didn't tell John. He thought I was going downtown to shop the January sales.

It was a terribly depressing fu-

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neral—hardly any flowers—and his wife looked like a mere child. My heart bled for them all. Afterwards, I learned something *very* interesting. Outside the funeral home I got into conversation with a neighbor of the Sloan family, and she said, "People think Wally was drunk that night, but I know he never touched liquor—not a drop. He worked hard—worked day and night. Must have been dead-tired and fell asleep at the wheel—that's what happened."

Doesn't that strike you as peculiar? He comes out of the tavern, cold-sober—starts his car—and immediately falls asleep!

You see, he was traveling east on the back street, so his car must have been in the big parking lot behind the gas station. Would he fall asleep after driving only half a block? Hardly! Besides, that street is full of frozen ruts that almost jolt you to death.

I don't know why I'm so concerned. Probably because I read so many mystery stories. (Do you have time to read, Tom? Shall I send you some paperbacks?)

At any rate, I asked a few questions at the grocery store this afternoon and there are two facts I was able to verify: Wallace Sloan always parked in the lot behind the gas station, *and* he never took a drink!

The cat is still here—interested in everything I do. He's good company for me. I've named him Midnight, because he's pitch-black except for two yellow eyes that shine like electric lights.

Now I must set the table for dinner. John has been switched to the day shift. We're having meat loaf tonight—your favorite.

Love—Mother

Thursday, January 5

Dear Tom,

I've been listening to the news bulletins and thanking God you're in the ground crew. Are you all right? Is there anything we can send you?

I must tell you the latest! Today I called on Wally Sloan's widow. I told her a fib—I said I knew Wally at the tavern—and I offered my sympathy and gave her a homemade fruitcake and a large jar of my strawberry jam. She almost collapsed! I guess city folks don't expect things like that.

I thought it might comfort the young woman to know how I stood by on the night of the accident. When I told her about it, as gently as I could, she squeezed my hand and ran crying into the bedroom.

They have a nice house, rather expensively furnished. Her mother was there—a bossy, disagreeable woman.

I said to her, "Do you think your daughter will be able to manage?"

"She'll manage," she said, "but no thanks to *him*. He left nothing but debts."

"What a pity!" I said. "And Wally worked so hard."

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She snorted. "Running a bar? What kind of work is that? He could have had a respectable office job downtown, but he'd rather associate with riffraff and spend his afternoons at the race track."

I thought, aha! The plot thickens! So Wally was a gambler! Well, Tom, I must admit I was beginning to lose sympathy for that young man, but I still felt sorry for his family. I came home and made an apple pie and tried to figure out a plan.

The cat was hanging around, getting his nose into everything, and I said to him, "Midnight, what would Miss Marple or Hildegarde Withers do in a case like this? I think they'd go snooping around—the way you do."

And so—after dinner when John left for his Lodge meeting—I started ringing doorbells in our building.

My first try was apartment 408. An elderly man came to the door, and I said, "Excuse me. I'm your neighbor in 410, and I picked up a stray cat on New Year's Eve. Somebody said it might belong to you. It's a black cat."

"No, ma'am," he said. "Our cat's ginger, and she's right there behind the radiator."

Well, I rang about twenty doorbells. Some people said no and slammed the door in my face, but most of the tenants were friendly. We'd exchange a few pleasant words, and then I'd mention the accident. Quite a few of them knew Wally from going to the tavern.

Then I rang the bell at 503. The middle-aged woman who answered looked like a floozy. She seemed quite interested in the young barkeeper and invited me in for a drink. John would have a fit if he knew I accepted, but I just had a tiny beer.

She said, "The blankety-blank tavern's closed now, and you gotta do your drinking at home. It ain't decent!" Her eyes were glazed, and her hair was a mess. "Yep," she said, "Wally was a cute kid—and a big spender! That's what I like—big spenders."

"His bar business must have been very successful," I said.

She looked amused at my innocence. "Oh, hell, the kid had something going on the side. Don't we all?"

"I know Wally liked to play the horses," I said.

"Play the horses! *Play* 'em?—why, he was a bookie!" I must have appeared shocked, because she added, "You didn't know that, did you? Well, he kept it quiet. He'd lose his liquor license if the cops ever found out. He used Gus for a pickup man."

"Gus?"

"You know Gus—the mechanic at the gas station. He picked up bets for Wally. Dincha hear about the big hassle at the bar New Year's Eve? Gus was too slow in paying off one of his customers, and the

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guy tried to take it out of his hide."

"Was Gus hurt?"

"Just a shiner. Wally threw 'em both out before it got real bad. The guy bet two hundred bucks, and the horse paid off fifteen-to-one. That was Larry. You know Larry on the third floor here? Big guy. Male nurse at the hospital. Could've broke Gus in two!"

"Oh, yes. Larry," I said.

Later I went down to the lobby and looked at the mail boxes, and there was an L. Marcus in 311. So I went up and rang his doorbell (to see if he had lost a black cat) but he wasn't home.

I wonder why Gus was slow in paying off. Fifteen-to-one! My goodness! That would come to $3000. Tom, do you suppose Wally "welshed," as they say? I'm beginning to wonder if his accident had anything to do with that bet!

If I hear more, I'll write.

Love from Mother

P.S.—Now it's Friday. I didn't get a chance to mail this yesterday, so will add the latest information. This morning I was stroking Midnight and thinking about the accident on the back street, and I could recall the scene plain as day. Everything was black and white—the black blood on the white snow—the black warehouse—snow-covered cars parked here and there—black tire tracks where Wally's car had swerved up over the opposite sidewalk—two black telephone poles leaning every-which-way.

And then I remembered something about Wally's car. It was all black against the snow, and it should have been partly white! Even if the collision knocked off most of the snow, it should have had *some* on the roof—if it had been parked behind the gas station all evening.

Tom, do you remember Uncle Roy's accident with his car three years ago? Do you remember what caused it? Well, I got to thinking about that, and it gave me an idea. So I went to see Gus.

John had ridden to work with his partner, so I took our car to the gas station and asked Gus to check the fan belt because it was making a funny noise. (Another fib.) He still had a lavender circle under one eye. While he was looking at the fan belt I started talking about the accident.

"How do you figure it happened?" I said. "We all know Wally didn't drink. Maybe something went wrong with his car. Maybe he lost control of it."

Gus took his head out from under the hood. "Yeah," he said, "that's what happened, all right. He told me something was wrong with the steering, and he left the car here for a checkup. But before I had a chance to work on it he drove it away and wrecked it."

"I don't understand much about cars," I said. "What could go wrong to cause an accident like that?"

"Could be a steering knuckle got

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loose. Hard to tell exactly what happened after a car's smashed up so bad."

Tom, I think the time has come for me to speak to John about this situation—to tell him everything I know. Don't you agree?

I'm mailing you some brownies. Hope they stay fresh.

Love—Mother

Monday, January 9

Dear Tom,

A quick note to let you know that my suspicions were correct!

After dinner Friday night I had a serious talk with John. I said, "John, dear, do you believe in Providence? When Wally Sloan was killed, Providence arranged to have a detective's wife looking out the window—a snoopy old gal with nothing to do but meddle in other people's business."

He looked at me as if I was losing my mind.

"I've found out a few things, John," I said, "and I think the police should take Gus in for questioning—I mean Gus at the gas station on the corner. Isn't there something a mechanic could do to a car to make it go out of control at the first bump in the road? Couldn't he loosen something in the steering arrangement? Because I think Wally was murdered!"

That was Friday night . . . Well, five minutes ago John telephoned from the station. He said the Homicide men got a confession from Gus! He took Larry's two hundred dollars and lost it in a crap game—never placed the bet at all! And when Larry put the pressure on him for the $3000, Gus tried to wiggle out of the mess by blaming the bookie. Then he rigged Wally's car for an accident, which he hoped would be fatal.

Just thought you'd like to know the outcome. John is quite proud of me. He says I made a deduction just like Sherlock Holmes or Ellery Queen. It was the snow missing from the top of Wally's car that convinced me Gus was lying—he *had* worked on the car, and indoors! John says I should go right on reading mystery stories!

Love from
Mother

P.S.—John is going to buy me a pedigreed kitten to keep me company. Midnight has disappeared. He must have jumped out the window—or something. We haven't seen him since Friday night.

NEXT MONTH . . .

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THE JEWELED BUTTERFLY

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

(Continued from page 56)

IN A TAXICAB HEADED TOWARD UNCLE Benedict's, Peggy studied the purloined pictures, trying to penetrate the details of the shadows.

Don Kimberly's arrest had been a terrific shock. The statement of Mrs. Bushnell had been like a devastating bomb.

Peggy had a blind faith in Don Kimberly, but she couldn't combat his arrest except by digging up new and convincing evidence. The morning newspapers would sound the death knell of her new job unless something could be turned up. She hoped with the hope of desperation that Uncle Benedict had been able to get some fingerprints from that broken whiskey bottle.

The beach scene, Peggy concluded, was a picnic, and apparently it had been a twosome—just Stella Lynn and the young man in the bathing suit who appeared in the pictures. He had taken a couple of pictures of Stella. The costume Stella was wearing would not have been permitted on a public beach, so these pictures must have been taken at a private part of the beach. Had they been taken before the others or afterward?

The series of small cabins, all uniform in appearance, suggested a motel, probably somewhere along the beach.

The cab slowed to a stop at Uncle Benedict's. "Wait for me," she told the driver, and ran up the steps.

Aunt Martha came to the door. "Heaven's sake, Peggy, give a body a chance to get there. You rang three times while I was putting my knitting down. What's the trouble?"

"Nothing. Where's Uncle?"

"Right here. Come on in."

Peggy walked over to the wheel chair and kissed Benedict on the forehead.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Nothing in particular. I wanted to see if you'd found out anything about that broken bottle, and—"

"Dammit, Peggy," he said irritably, "I've taught you to lie better than that."

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Everything. Never run your words together when you're lying. Sounds too much like reciting a formula. Never let a sucker feel he's hearing a rehearsed line. When you're lying you want to be thoroughly at ease—never have tension in your voice.

"Keep your sentences short. Don't intersperse explanations with lies. That's where the average liar falls down. He puts himself on the defensive in the middle of what should be the most convincing part of his lie.

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"Now sit down there and tell me what's handed you such a jolt. Tell the truth, if you can. If you can't, tell the kind of a lie that'll make me proud of you. Now, what's given you such a jolt?"

Peggy said, "They arrested Don Kimberly for Stella's murder."

"What evidence?"

"That's the tough part. They found a bottle of potassium cyanide among his photographic chemicals, right over the sink in his darkroom."

Uncle Benedict threw back his grizzled head and laughed.

"It's no laughing matter," she said.

"Makes him out so damned stupid, that's all. There he is with a whole darkroom. Got a sink and running water and everything, eh?"

"That's right."

"How many people did they think he was aiming to kill with cyanide?"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose he had killed her. He's scored a bull's-eye. That was all he wanted. He'd done the job. He's got no more use for poison. He'd wash the rest of his ammunition down the sink. Just turn the hose on and wash it down the drain.

"Nope, somebody's planting evidence. Seems funny the cops didn't think about that. Perhaps they have. Maybe they're giving this person lots of rope for self-hanging purposes."

Listening to him, she realized the logic of what he said, and suddenly felt much better. She spread the pictures out in front of him.

Uncle Benedict's eyes lit up. "Good-looking babe," he said, studying the pictures of Stella in the bathing suit. "Darn good-looking."

Aunt Martha, fixing a pot of hot tea for Peggy, snorted, "You'd think he was a Don Juan to listen to him."

"Casanova, Casanova," Uncle Benedict corrected her irritably. "Get some life into it! All right, what about these pictures, Peggy?"

"What can you tell me about them?"

He picked up the pictures and studied them. Then he said, "This is the motel where they stayed Saturday."

"Who stayed there?"

"This girl in a bathing suit and the fellow who's with her."

"Uncle Benedict, you shouldn't say things like that without knowing. You don't know they *stayed* there, and you can't *know* it was Saturday."

"I don't, eh?" he grinned. "It sticks out plain as the nose on your face. This here picture with the beach in the background was taken Sunday morning. Same car here as is in the other picture. Put two and two together."

"You're jumping at conclusions and not being very fair to Stella."

"Not as bad as what the coroner did, broadcasting a girl's secrets that

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way. Ought to be ashamed of himself. Two months pregnant, and he puts it in the paper!"

"He had to do that," she said. "It's part of the evidence. It shows the motivation for murder."

"Uh-huh," Uncle Benedict said, studying the pictures carefully.

"What makes you think it was Saturday noon in one picture and Sunday morning in the other?" she asked.

"Use your judgment," he told her. "Here's a motel. See all those garages with cars in them?"

"Yes."

"Where's the sun?"

"What do you mean, where's the sun?"

"Look at your shadows," he said. "Here, hand me that ruler."

She handed it to him. His arthritis-crippled hands moved the ruler over the photograph so that one end was against a patch of shadow, the other end against the top of an ornamental light pole. "All right, there's the angle of your sun, good and high."

"All right, so what?"

"Look at the automobiles in the garages. Most motel patrons are transients. They're hitting the road. They want to come in at night, have a bath, sleep, get up early, be on their way.

"Now, look at this one. Automobiles in almost every garage, and from the angle of the sun it's either three in the afternoon or nine in the morning. Look carefully, and you can see it's morning because here's a cabin with a key in a half-open door. The key has a big metal tag hanging from it so tenants won't cart it off, and it's caught the sunlight and reflected it right into the camera. That car got away early. If it had been afternoon the key would have been in the office instead of in the door.

"Only one car is gone; most of the people using the motel aren't traveling and that means it's Sunday. The guests are week-enders, people who came Saturday to spend a week-end. Spend it where? Not in a motel, unless that motel's at a beach.

"Now look at this other picture. Warm, sunny day. Hardly any surf. See that wharf out there? Lots of fishermen on it. Those are people who came early and—"

"I don't see any wharf."

"Take a good look," he said.

"That's just a black spot out there—No, wait a minute—"

"Black spot nothing," he said. "It's the end of a pier. See it sticking out there? Take a magnifying glass; you'll see people all bunched up, fishing at the far end of the—"

"Of course," she said. "I hadn't noticed it before."

"Now, look at the people. Here's where a road runs down to the beach. Jammed with cars parked all along it. But people haven't spread out on the north end of this beach yet. On a Sunday the whole thing would be crowded. The way it is

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now, just about the number of people are on the beach who would have come in those parked cars. They haven't had to park their cars way uptown and walk down to the beach.

"See the shadow of the automobile? Sun's pretty much overhead. It's just about noon. Wouldn't get that big a play on a beach this time of year except Saturday. Sunday noon it'd be even bigger. All right, what more do you want to know?"

She said, "I'd like to know who owns that automobile."

"Why don't you find out?"

"How can I?"

He said, "How many beaches are there around here that have piers sticking out that far? How many motels in that city—"

"What city?"

He tapped the ornamental lighting fixture. "See the peculiar design on that lighting fixture? I could tell you a lot about those fixtures. Old pal of mine took over the sale of ornamental lighting fixtures to a city. *There's* a great opportunity! That's *real* graft. Perfectly legitimate, too. I guess that's why I never cared much for it, but I can tell you—"

"You don't have to tell me," she said, "I know where it is myself now. Why in the world didn't I notice the significance of that ornamental street light before?"

"Preoccupied," he said. "That's 'cause you're in love."

"I am not!"

"Bet you are! Wrapped up in that Beau Brummel guy they took to prison."

"I am not, but— I *would* like to impress him once with Peggy Castle the girl, and not just Peggy Castle the logical thinker."

"How are you going to do it?"

"I'm going to prove he didn't commit the murder."

Uncle Benedict chuckled. "Listen to her, Martha. She wants him to notice her as a cute trick and not as an efficient thinking machine, so she goes out and uses her *brain!* Don't use your brain when you're trying to impress a man, Peggy. Don't let him think you have any brain. Have curves. Be helpless and—"

"You leave Peggy alone," Aunt Martha said. "She's doing it *her* way."

Uncle Benedict shook his head. "Men can't see glamor and brains together, Martha. Either one or the other."

Aunt Martha put down the teapot. "What did you marry me for?"

His eyes were reminiscent. "Glamor, curves," he said. "Boy, when you walked out on the stage with tights on, you—"

"So," she blazed indignantly, "*now* you're trying to tell me I haven't any brains!"

Uncle Benedict shook his head. "Arguing with a woman," he said, "is like trying to order the weather to suit the farmers. Where are you goin' in such a rush, Peggy?"

Peggy was dashing for the door.

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"I'm not going, I'm gone. Thanks and goodbye!"

Peggy felt a surge of triumph when within less than an hour from the time she reached the beach city she had located the motel. The proprietress was reluctant to discuss registrations.

"We're running a decent, clean, respectable place," she said. "Of course, we don't ask people to show us marriage licenses every time they come in, but they don't do that even in the Waldorf-Astoria. We just try to look 'em over and—"

Peggy patiently interrupted to explain that hers was a private matter; that if necessary she could get official authority; but that she didn't want to and she didn't think the woman wanted her to.

That secured instant results. Peggy examined the week-end registrations.

The car was 5N20861, registered to Peter Bushnell. Mr. and Mrs. Bushnell had spent the week-end in a cabin.

Peggy could have cried with disappointment. All her hopes were dashed. If she could have proved that Stella had had a boy friend with whom she had spent the week-end, then Stella's date with Don Kimberly would have looked like a mere business date. But now that had been swept away. Stella had spent the week-end with the Bushnells.

Fighting back tears, Peggy started back to her apartment. Then a thought struck her with the force of a blow. She felt certain Mrs. Bushnell had said that Pete was "still" married to her. Did that mean—?

Peggy frantically consulted the address she had taken from the registration book at the motel. It was a ten-to-one shot, but she was taking it. Peter Bushnell was going to have a late visitor.

She drove rapidly to the address, an old-fashioned, unpretentious, comfortable-looking apartment house.

A card told her Peter Bushnell's apartment was on the second floor. Peggy didn't even stop for the elevator, but raced up the stairs to the apartment. A slender ribbon of illumination showed from the underside of the door.

Her heart hammering with excitement, she rang the bell.

Peggy heard a chair being pushed back, and then the door opened and Peggy found herself looking at the face of the man in the photograph. Now it was a haggard face, drawn with suffering.

"You're Peter Bushnell," she said. "I'm Peggy Castle. I want to talk with you."

She stepped past him into the apartment, turned, smiled reassuringly, and waited for him to close the door.

"Won't you—won't you sit down?" he said. "It's rather late, but—"

"I wanted to talk with you about Stella," she said.

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His face showed consternation. "I—I have nothing to say."

"Oh, yes, you have. I know some of the facts. In justice to yourself and in justice to Stella's memory you'll have to give me the rest of them."

"What facts?"

"For instance, the week-end at the Seaswept Motel. You registered under your own name. Why did you do that, Pete?"

"Why not? The car's registered in my name. Why shouldn't I have used it?"

"Because you registered Stella as your wife."

"Well—so what?"

"Suppose Frances found out about it?"

"How would she find out?"

"I found out about it."

"How?"

Peggy merely smiled. She said, "Tell me about Stella, Pete."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm an investigator."

"With the police?"

"No. I represent the company Stella worked for. You don't want Stella's name dragged through the mud, and we don't want it dragged through the mud. You were in love with her, weren't you, Pete?"

He nodded. His face showed anguish.

"Now, then, let's get down to brass tacks," Peggy said. "You married Frances. Stella was going with Bill Everett. You went on week-end parties together, didn't you?"

He said, "That was before I was married to Frances. Then Fran and I got married and— Well, I found out it was a mistake before we'd been married three months."

"Why was it a mistake, Pete?"

"Because I had been in love with Stella all the time and hadn't realized it. You have no idea what it was like to be out with Stella. She was such good company. She never sulked, never got mad, never complained. She took everything just the way it came, and she always had such a good time that you had a good time, too. She enjoyed life. She got a kick out of everything.

"Fran was just the opposite. Fran had to have things just so. When she was with a foursome she hid behind Stella's good nature so you didn't see her real character. After we were married, and it was just the two of us—well, it showed up then."

"What happened?"

"I wanted a divorce, and Fran wouldn't give me one. She knew by that time I was in love with Stella and did everything she could to block us. She swore that if she couldn't have me, Stella couldn't."

"So you and Frances separated, and you and Stella started living together?"

"Well, in a way. Not quite like that."

"Why didn't you live together all the time, Pete? Why those surreptitious week-ends?"

"Stella was afraid of Fran. She

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didn't want Fran to find it out, but — Well, in a way we were married."

"What do you mean?"

"We went down to Mexico and had a marriage ceremony performed."

"When?"

"Four or five months ago."

"Why didn't you tell the police about this?"

"Well, I was trying to make up my mind. That's what I was doing when you rang the bell. I don't know what to do. Fran, of course, would have me right where she wanted me, but under the circumstances— I just don't know.

"Fran can be a bearcat. She's been married before. The man she was married to wrote me a letter. He said Fran was poison, that she wouldn't give *him* a divorce, that she was a dog in the manger."

"What did you do?"

"I hunted him out and beat him up."

Peggy, looking at the anguished face, was thinking rapidly. There had to be an angle—there had to be!

"You knew Stella was going to have a baby?"

"Yes. Our baby. She'd only just found out herself. She told me Saturday."

Meeting his eyes, Peggy said, "Pete, she really *was* your wife. Your marriage to Fran was illegal. Fran had never been divorced."

"She told me she'd been divorced."

"Did you check on it?"

"No, I took her word for it."

"You were married to Stella in Mexico. That marriage was legal. Stella was your legal wife. Now tell me about Bill Everett."

"That crook! He ran with a gang. They all got caught on that stickup in Cofferville."

"Had he been in touch with Stella recently?"

"Not that I know of. Not since he got out of prison."

"You haven't seen him?"

Pete shook his head.

"Did you know Stella had asked Don Kimberly to meet her at the Royal Pheasant?"

"No, I didn't. She didn't say anything."

"Do you know where Bill Everett is?"

"No."

"You have no idea how I could locate him?"

"No."

"How long had he been mixed up with this gang, Pete? Was it just one slip or—"

"One slip, nothing," Pete said. "The guy was just no good right from the start. He'd been lying to us all the time. That's the way he was making his money—he was a member of a stickup gang. He thought he was smart, thought he was beating the law."

"Do you know the other members of the gang?"

He shook his head. "Guess you could find out who they were from the court records. They were all

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caught on that service station stick-up."

"They'd been working together for some time?"

"Apparently so," Pete said. "I don't know too much about it. Anyway, I'm all broken up. I can't think good."

Peggy said, "Try and think. Tell me everything you know about Bill."

Pete said, "The gang used to communicate with each other by ads in the personal column of a newspaper. Bill told me that once. They'd arrange meeting places and things of that sort. That's all I know."

Peggy said, "Pete, I want you to do *exactly* what I am going to tell you."

"What?" he asked.

"This," she said, "is the way to clear the thing up, provided you do *exactly* as I tell you. I want you to go down to the morgue and claim the body of Stella Lynn. Claim the body as that of your wife. Do you understand? *You're her husband.*"

"But," he said, "our marriage—well, you know, it wasn't—"

"How do you *know* it wasn't? You have Stella's memory to think of. Do exactly as I tell you. Go down to the morgue at once. Claim the body on the ground that you're Stella's husband. Don't let *anyone* get you to admit that there's even the faintest doubt in your mind about the validity of that Mexican marriage. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"Do you have any money?" she asked.

"Enough."

"I can help—"

"No. This is on me," he said. As he pushed back his chair his manner showed the relief of one who has had a load lifted from his shoulders.

In the newspaper office Peggy consulted the back files, carefully scanning the want ad section.

In a paper of four days before she found the ad she wanted in the personal column:

> FRAN, get in touch with me on a big deal. I can't handle it alone, but together we can make big dough. Call Essex 4-6810 any time day or night. BILL E.

Pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were beginning to fall into place in Peggy's mind. The next question was whether she should pour her story into the ears of Detective Fred Nelson or get some additional evidence.

A silver dime was to determine Peggy's next course. She called Essex 4-6810 and waited, her pulses pounding with excitement as she heard the bell ring at the other end of the line.

If things went through without a hitch now, she'd handle it herself. If she struck a snag over the telephone, her next call would be to Detective Nelson.

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At length a masculine voice, wary, uncordial, said, "Yeah?"

"Is Bill Everett there?"

"Who wants him?"

"A girl."

The man laughed and said, "You could have fooled me. Hang on."

She heard his voice raised in a call. "Bill in there? Some dame wants him on the phone."

A moment later she heard steps approaching the phone; another voice, cold, guarded but curious, said, "Yes? Hello."

"Bill?"

"Who is it?"

"I'm a friend of Fran's. It's about a butterfly."

The voice at the other end of the line instantly lost all coldness and reserve.

"Well, it's about time!" he exclaimed. "Where the hell *is* Fran? Why didn't she call me about the insurance interview?"

"She's where she can't call."

"Good Lord, you don't mean she's—"

"Now, take it easy," Peggy said. "I have a message for you."

"What is it?"

"Don't be silly. I can't give it to you over the phone. Where can I meet you?"

"You got a car?"

"Yes."

"Come on out here."

"Now, wait a minute," Peggy said, "there's a lot of this I didn't get from Fran. She only gave me the number to call and—"

"Adams and Elmore," he said. "It's on the corner. What kind of a car are you driving?"

"Fifty-one green coupé."

"How long will it take you?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Okay, okay, get out here! Park your bus on Elmore just before you get to Adams—on the right-hand side of the street, headed south. Sit there and wait for me. Got that?"

"Yes."

"Now, when is Fran going to—"

"Wait until I see you," Peggy interrupted. "You talk too much over the phone."

"Damned if I don't," Everett said, and she could hear the receiver being slammed into place at the other end of the line.

Peggy dialed police headquarters, asked for Detective Fred Nelson, and was lucky enough to find him in.

"This is Peggy Castle," she said.

"Oh, yes, hello." His voice was more cordial than she had expected.

"I have a lead on the Stella Lynn case."

"Yeah, I know," Nelson said. "You have lots of leads. You pulled the trigger on a lot of publicity, didn't you?"

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Nice and dramatic," he said. "It worked out a thousand per cent. Grief-crazed husband stumbles into the morgue, tearfully claims the body of Stella Lynn, his wife. How

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the newspapers fell for that one! They just called me from the morgue."

He stopped talking, and Peggy said nothing.

"You there?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, why don't you say something?"

"You're doing the talking. I called you up to tell you something. When you get ready to listen let me know."

He laughed. "All right, I'll listen, but don't think I was born yesterday just because you didn't meet me until today. I've been around a while."

"I'm quite certain you have," Peggy said. "I have a lead in the Lynn case."

"What is it this time?"

Peggy said, "Stella wanted Don Kimberly to meet her at the Royal Pheasant because she wanted to find out if it would be possible to negotiate for the return of the gems on that Garrison job."

"What!" Nelson exclaimed.

"Bill Everett, Stella's ex-boy friend, was mixed up in that job. Now he's got a fortune in gems and can't fence them. You know what happens at a time like that. He wants to know whether he can make a deal with the insurance company."

"Who's this fellow you say pulled the job?"

"Bill Everett. He's been in trouble before. He was picked up in Cofferville for the robbery of a service station."

"Uh-huh, go ahead. What's the pitch?"

"I have a date with him. He's going to give me the lowdown. Now, if you wanted to cooperate—"

"I'm sorry, Miss Castle," Nelson said. "You're out of bounds. Cooperating with you doesn't do anything except get your company off the hot stove and leave the Police Department holding the bag. If you have any chestnuts in the fire, just get yourself another cat's-paw."

"But don't you want to recover—"

"I want to recover from a couple of bad blows below the belt," Nelson said. "You don't know whether Bushnell was legally married to Stella Lynn or not, but you've got the story nicely planted on the front page of every newspaper, together with pictures of the stricken husband. I don't think I care about being a stalking horse. Where is this Bill Everett?"

"Find out, if you're so damned smart," she blazed, and slammed the receiver.

She drove rapidly to Elmore, followed it down toward Adams, eased the car to a stop, and waited.

Sitting there in the dark she experienced a feeling of complete loneliness. The motor of the car made sharp cracking noises as the metal cooled off. Five blocks behind her was a through highway.

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The sound of traffic, muted by distance, came to her ears.

A man walked by but seemed to take no notice of the car. He moved rapidly, shoulders squared, heels pounding the pavement as if he were going somewhere in a hurry.

Peggy waited another five minutes. Suddenly she was conscious of a shadow at the right-rear fender of the car. Then the door on the right-hand side swung open. A man eased into the seat beside her and said, "Okay, wind her up."

Peggy asked, "Are you—"

"Wind her up, I said," the man told her. "Get the hell out of here."

Peggy started the motor and glided away from the curb. The man at her side swung around so he could look through the rear window, and carefully watched the street behind him.

"Turn right on Adams," he said.

Peggy turned right.

"Left at the next intersection."

Peggy followed instructions.

"Pick up a little speed," he told her. "Don't dawdle along. All right, now give it the gun and turn right at the next intersection . . . Okay, left again . . . Okay."

At length the man eased back into a more comfortable position, ceased watching the road behind them, and fastened his eyes on Peggy.

Peggy was conscious of a distinct feeling of disquiet, a peculiar apprehension. Suppose everything *didn't* go right. Suppose . . .

"It's your dime," the man said. "Start talking."

Peggy knew she had to draw him out. So far she had got by on bluff and surmise. Now she was going to need facts, and the man beside her was the only person from whom she could get those facts.

The man continued, "What the hell's the pitch? Let's see who you are first. I'm Bill. Who are you?"

Peggy slipped her hand down the opening of her blouse, brought out the jeweled butterfly, held it so he could see it for a brief instant, then popped it back into her blouse.

"Hey, wait a minute," he said, "where the hell did you get that?"

"Where do you suppose?"

"Here, pull into this next alley," Bill said. "We're going to have a showdown on this."

She felt something prodding at her side, and, glancing down, saw the glint of light on blued steel.

"Get over there. Turn down that alley." His shoe crushed her foot against the brake pedal.

With a little cry of pain, she jerked her foot away. The car swerved. The gun jabbed hard into her ribs. "Turn down that alley!"

She bit her lip, fighting back the pain in her foot, and turned down the alley.

Bill reached over and turned off the ignition switch. "Now, baby," he said, "if you're trying to pull a fast one, what's going to happen to you isn't—"

Abruptly the car was flooded

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with brilliance as a following car, running without lights, suddenly blazed its headlights on the parked car.

Bill shoved the gun under his coat. "If that's a prowl car," he warned, "and you make a squawk, I'll kill you just as sure as—"

A figure that had jumped out of the car behind came striding forward. A man's sneering voice said, "Well, Bill, trying to cut yourself a piece of cake, eh?"

At the sound of that voice Peggy could see Bill's face twist in a spasm of fear. He jerked his body around. "Butch!" he exclaimed, and then after a moment added, "Am I glad *you're* here! I've caught a dame trying to pull a fast one on us."

"Yeah. You look as though you're glad to see us," Butch said.

Another man came up on the other side of the car and stood at the open window on Peggy's side. He was a tall cadaverous man with lips so thin that his mouth looked as though it might have been cut across his face with a razor blade.

The man Bill had addressed as Butch said, "Get in and take the wheel, Slim. Drive up to Bill's place. Bill, you get in with us. I want to talk with you."

Slim opened the door and slapped Peggy's thigh with the back of his hand. "Move over, cutie."

Butch opened the door on the right-hand side. "Come on, Bill."

Bill said, "Sure, sure." His voice was too full of cordiality. "I want to talk things over with you guys, but listen, I think this babe is maybe a private dick or something. She's trying to pull a fast one."

"Yeah," Butch said. "We know all about this babe. Come on, get in, Bill. We're going to take a nice little ride and have a nice little talk."

Bill got out of the car. Peggy slid over on the seat, and Slim took the wheel.

"You'll have to back out," Butch said to Slim. "It's a blind alley."

"Okay."

"You take the lead," Butch went on. "If she makes any trouble, bean her." Butch moved away with Bill.

Slim reached into his side coat pocket, pulled out a blackjack, and looped the thong around his wrist. "Let's not have any misunderstanding, sister," he said. "One peep out of you, one false move, and I'll knock you so cold it'll be next week before you come to. I'm going to be driving with one hand. This other one is ready to chop you down whenever you make a yip. Get me?"

She smiled at him and said, "Aren't you making a mountain out of a molehill? Perhaps if you'll tell me—"

"Yeah, I know," Slim said, "pulling the old sex charm. It doesn't work, babe. When I'm on a business deal I'm cold as a cucumber. Now, turn your kisser around here so I can take a little precaution against any sudden screams."

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"What do you mean?"

He grabbed her around the shoulders and pulled her head over to him roughly. She felt the slap of a hand across her mouth and something sticky against her cheeks. Almost before she understood what he was doing, a wide strip of adhesive tape had been slapped across her mouth. Slim's cigarette-stained fingers massaged the tape firmly into place.

"All right, baby," he said. "Don't try to raise your hands to that adhesive tape. The minute you do, you get clouted. Don't make any grabs for the steering wheel. Don't try anything funny. If you reach for the door handle you'll never know what hit you. Okay, here we go."

He drove skillfully with his left hand, his right on the back of the seat, the blackjack ready. The glint in his eyes told Peggy he was, as he had said, cold as a cucumber when he was on a business deal.

Slim tooled the car along until they glided to the curb in front of an apartment house a block from Adams and Elmore.

"Just sit still," Slim cautioned.

The other car parked behind them. Peggy saw Butch escorting Bill Everett, saw that Bill was talking volubly, rapidly, and that Butch wasn't even listening.

A third man came up to address Slim briefly. "I'll go ahead and make sure the coast is clear," he said. "Wait for my flash."

"Okay," Slim said.

Bill and Butch moved into the apartment house. A light came on in a ground-floor window. The curtain was promptly drawn, shutting off the light. A few seconds later a flashlight blinked twice.

"Okay, babe," Slim said. "This is it. Let's go."

He reached across her, opened the door, and shoved her out. She looked desperately up and down the deserted street.

Slim's hand moved deftly down her arm, caught her wrist, doubled it back until excruciating pain caused her to take a step forward to ease the pressure.

Slim stepped forward with her. The pressure remained the same.

Peggy tried to scream, but only a little whimpering noise came from behind the adhesive tape. In the end she was all but running, trying to get just enough ahead of Slim to ease the pressure on her arm.

She was hurried along a dark corridor. A third man, who had evidently been driving the other car, jerked open a door. Peggy was pushed inside.

Slim tossed her purse at Butch. "Catch," he said.

Butch opened her purse and examined her driving license and identification.

"Honest, Butch," Bill said, "this is a new one on me. She made contact and—"

Butch looked up from Peggy's driving license. "Shut him up, Slim."

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"Okay," Slim said, moving forward.

Bill said, "No, no, I am on the level with this. She—"

Slim swung the blackjack with a deft wrist motion. The peculiar *thunk* sounded as though someone had slapped an open palm against a ripe watermelon. Bill turned glassy-eyed; his head dropped forward, he slumped down in the chair, and then, with fear in his eyes, he held on to a thin margin of consciousness.

"No, no," he screamed. "You guys aren't going to do that to me."

The peculiar *thunk* was repeated.

Butch didn't even glance at Bill. He looked up at Peggy and said, "So you're from the insurance company that has the two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar policy on the Garrison gems."

Peggy pointed toward the strip of adhesive tape on her lips.

"You don't need to have that off to nod," Butch said, his eyes cold.

She remained stiff-necked, defiant. Butch jerked his head, and Slim moved over beside her.

"When I ask questions," Butch said, "I want you to answer them. Slim plays rough, and he doesn't have any more feeling about women than a snake. Now, as I get it, you work for the insurance company, and Bill was making a deal with you to turn back the gems provided you could buy him immunity and pay him maybe thirty or forty thousand bucks. Is that the case?"

She shook her head.

"Soften her up, Slim," Butch said. "She's lying."

Slim tapped the back of her neck with the blackjack. It was only a gentle tap, but it sent a sharp pain shooting through Peggy's brain. She saw a succession of bright flashes in front of her eyes and felt a numbing paralysis that gradually gave place to a dull, throbbing ache.

"I'm waiting for an answer," Butch said.

She took a deep breath, fought back the nauseating headache, then shook her head determinedly.

Slim cocked his wrist and then held it at a sign from Butch, whose slightly puzzled eyes held a glint of admiration. "Dammit," he said, "the babe's got nerve!"

Butch turned to regard the unconscious Bill. Then he said, "When he comes back to join us we'll ask *him* some questions. I sure had a straight tip that Bill was in on a sellout, and—hell, it *has* to be true."

"Want me to take the tape off?" Slim asked.

"Not yet," Butch said. "We've got all night. We—"

There was a peculiar sound at the door of the apartment, a rustling noise as though garments were brushing against it.

Butch looked at Slim who moved toward the door. His right hand streaked for the left lapel of his coat, but the blackjack that was looped around the wrist impeded

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the motion. The door banged open explosively, hitting against the wall.

Detective Fred Nelson, looking over the sights of a .38, sized up the situation. "Okay, you punks," he said, "that'll be about all."

He looked at Peggy, sitting there with the strip of tape across her lips. "I guess this time you *were* on the up and up," he said. "You got sore and wouldn't tell me where Bill Everett was living, but it happened one of the boys had done a routine check job on him because he is an ex-con.

"Now you guys line up against that wall, and keep your hands up. You can spend the night in a cell or on a marble slab, and it don't make a damn bit of difference to me which it is."

Peggy sat in Detective Fred Nelson's office. Police Captain Farwell, whose eyes made no attempt to conceal respectful admiration, sat at one end of the big table. Don Kimberly sat at the other end. Nelson asked the questions.

Peggy felt like a tightrope walker, giving them step-by-step conclusions to get Kimberly off the hook of the murder charge, but faced with the necessity of glossing over certain clues that she and Kimberly had suppressed, and of minimizing the clues Nelson had overlooked. There was no use in making Nelson look dumb before his superiors.

"A woman," Peggy explained, "naturally notices certain things a man would never see."

"What things?" Nelson asked.

"Well, for instance, a matter of housekeeping."

"Go ahead," the Captain said.

"Well," Peggy went on, "you have to put yourself in the position of a murderer in order to understand how a murder is committed."

Captain Farwell glanced at Detective Nelson. "It isn't going to hurt you to listen to this with *both* ears," he said.

Peggy said, "Let's suppose I wanted to murder Stella Lynn by giving her a drink of poisoned whiskey. I'd have to make certain *she* drank the whiskey and *I* didn't. So I'd plant my bottle of poisoned liquor and then go call on Stella so I could get rid of her liquor.

"Now, Stella might be fresh out of whiskey, or she might have a bottle that was half full, or she might have a full bottle. She was going out on a date. She wouldn't want to drink too much, and, of course, I wouldn't want to drink much because I couldn't afford to be drunk."

"So what *would* you do?" Nelson asked, his eyes still cautious.

"Why," Peggy said, "I'd make it a point to smash her bottle of whiskey so I'd have a good excuse to go out and get another one to take its place. Then I'd want to be sure Stella was the only one who drank out of that new bottle."

"Go ahead," the Captain said.

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"Well, if you dropped the bottle on the living-room carpet, or on the kitchen floor, which had linoleum, it might not break, and then your murder plan would be out the window. There was only one place you could drop it—on the bathroom tiles.

"A man would have a lot of trouble working out a scheme by which he could take the bottle of liquor Stella had, carry it into the bathroom, and drop it—without the whole business seeming very strange. But a *woman* could do it easily.

"She'd run in while Stella was dressing. Stella would say to her, 'I'm getting ready to go out on a date, but come in and talk to me anyway,' and the woman would have all the chance in the world to carry the liquor to the bathroom, start to pour a drink, drop the bottle, and say, 'Oh, dear, Stella. I've dropped your whiskey. You go right ahead with your dressing. I'll run down, get another bottle, and then clean up this mess.'

"So the woman went to get the other bottle of whiskey she had planted nearby—a bottle that had been poisoned and then resealed. She came back with the package, handed it to Stella, and said, 'Now, Stella, you just go right ahead with your dressing, and I'll clean up this mess in the bathroom.'

"So she started picking up the pieces of glass, and Stella took the new bottle of whiskey. Stella being Stella, she simply had to open it, pour herself a good-sized drink, and toss it off."

There was silence for several seconds, and then Captain Farwell slowly nodded and again glanced at Nelson.

Nelson said almost defensively, "It's a damned good theory, but where's the proof?"

"The proof," Peggy said, her eyes wide and innocent, "why, there's *plenty* of proof! I looked carefully at the bathroom floor to see if there weren't little pieces of glass that hadn't been cleaned up. It's awfully hard to clean up glass slivers, you know. Sure enough, there were several little pieces."

Nelson took a deep breath. "Yes," he said, "we saw them."

"And then, of course, the broken bottle that was out in the trash can in the back yard. You see, the whiskey had to be mopped up, and the murderer's hands were sticky and they left a beautiful set of fingerprints on the broken bottle."

"Where's that bottle?" Captain Farwell asked.

Nelson's eyes shifted.

"Oh, Mr. Nelson has it," Peggy said quickly. "He's got *all* that evidence, and it occurred to me that if Mr. Nelson would have his men comb the neighborhood thoroughly to see if someone didn't leave a package at a nearby drugstore or restaurant, or some place around there where she could go back and get it, and they could identify that

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woman— Then, of course, there are the fingerprints."

"Whose fingerprints are they?" Captain Farwell asked Nelson.

Peggy answered the question. "We'll have to let Mr. Nelson finish the detail work before we know for sure, but they have to be those of Mrs. Bushnell.

"You see, we've established that Stella was killed by a woman. We know Bill Everett got Fran to try to manipulate a sellout with the insurance company. His only point of contact was Frances, and her point of contact was Stella.

"And Fran was the only one who simply wouldn't have dared to take that butterfly. If she had, Bill would have known she was so jealous of Stella that she used the opportunity to kill Stella instead of peddling the gems to the insurance company.

"She wrote me that anonymous letter telling me Kimberly and Stella were going to meet at the Royal Pheasant, then planted the poison in his darkroom—"

"How did *she* know I'd suggest a meeting at the Royal Pheasant?" Kimberly asked.

"She knew that was the most natural spot. Stella had told her she'd arrange a meeting, and Fran must have figured you'd say the Royal Pheasant. If you had named some other place Fran could have tipped me off. But you didn't."

Captain Farwell got to his feet. "Well," he said, "the newspaper boys are out there yelling their heads off, wanting to get in and get some action. I don't care what the details are, just so—" He paused and looked at Peggy, then looked at Don Kimberly. "Just so the department gets the credit for doing the damned fine job that it did.

"And on this murder," Captain Farwell went on, "we're sorry, Kimberly, that we had to take you into custody."

"Oh, think nothing of it," Kimberly said.

Captain Farwell left the room.

Peggy got to her feet. "Well," she said, "we won't be here when you're talking with the newspapermen, Mr. Nelson. You can handle that. I'll get you the broken whiskey bottle with the fingerprints on it. Of course, you understand that E.B. Halsey, president of the company, is very anxious to have a good press for the insurance company—"

"Sure, sure, I understand," Nelson said, "and we want to thank you folks for your cooperation."

"I take it I'm free to walk out?" Kimberly asked.

Nelson nodded. "Hell, yes. Want me to pull out a red carpet?"

Don Kimberly looked at Peggy Castle as though suddenly seeing her for the first time.

"Come on, glamor puss," he said. "Let's go and let Nelson get his work done. You're too pretty to be mixed up in a sordid crime."

"Oh, how nice!" Peggy exclaimed. "Just wait till I tell my Uncle Benedict what you just said!"

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THE SECRET

by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

SIMON AND HARRY EMMETT, cousins, both thought well of themselves. Both, also, having lost their parents in a typhoid outbreak, lived in Marthwaite with an old aunt; both, in the early 1890's, worked in the pressing shop at Syke Mill; both took the crowded first tram of the day and swayed in rhythm with its bumpy passage down the West Riding Ire Valley to their place of employment.

Both were powerful men with the sinewy arms needed for the heavy job they did together, which in those days consisted of folding many yards of cloth backwards and forwards over sheets of heavy brown-cardboard "press papers," then carrying the massive piles thus composed to one of the six tall presses, and screwing them down. Both when going to work wore the clogs, the cloth caps, the wool mufflers, then customary for men in their position. Both Harry and Simon were fair in hair and complexion.

But in all other respects they were entirely different—almost opposite, you might say. They even liked themselves for entirely different reasons.

For Harry was tall, robust in frame, and good-looking in a rather florid sort of way. His eyes were blue, his cheeks fair, his lips moist and red, his hair thick and curly; he

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was cheerful and laughed a good deal, perhaps rather more than a sensible man should. He drank a bit and would have drunk more but he wished to maintain his local reputation as a successful wrestler; he was a great one for girls, who adored him. In all these matters Harry took a light-hearted pride, and for all these matters his cousin Simon despised him.

For Simon was short and, though muscular and tough, hardly seemed to have enough flesh to cover his bones—"scraggy," Harry cheerfully called him. His fair hair, though it attempted a mild wave, was thin and always appeared as if plastered to his skull; his eyes were grey and chilly. His head, however, was large and nobly shaped, and he was conscious that its contents were much superior to Harry's. Simon enjoyed a drink, but took one rarely; he had not yet seen a girl he fancied and was not going to embark on sex relations till he did. He was honest, conscientious, altogether reliable if not very sunny. His employers approved of him, and the more serious of his workmates liked him well enough.

One morning on his way to work —it was January, and the Ire Valley was still shrouded in wintry dusk —Simon from his seat in the tram observed Harry, who was standing, strapholding, in lively talk with a man and a couple of girls who stood around him. Simon knew the man; he was a pleasant good-natured fellow named William Brearley, gamekeeper to one of the groups of manufacturers—the owner of Syke Mill was in another such group—who leased part of the wild moorland above Marthwaite for shooting purposes. Brearley, though only in his twenties like the Emmetts, was already provided with a comfortable cottage up in a fold of the hills, and from the way he held the arm of one of the girls to steady her and who coloured pleasantly at Harry's jokes on the subject, it seemed likely he was contemplating matrimony with her.

Simon gave the girl—Alice Shepherd, he remembered, by name—a shrewd look, and approved. A nice, good, ordinary girl, he decided; brown eyes, brown hair, pointed chin; joking back at Harry staunchly without saying anything beyond modesty; nice enough—but not very interesting. He would need more than that for himself. His glance moved away.

Ah! This, it appeared, was Alice's younger sister, Emily. Very like Alice, too, but all the world away. Those large, dark, loving eyes in the heart-shaped face, that cloud of dark hair beneath her shawl, the lovely rose of her cheek, her delicious rather pale lips curved in a gentle smile, the air of sweet timidity, of shy refinement. Her shawl slipped from her head and shoulders as she looked up; her bosom, he saw, was soft and full.

Something stirred in Simon's

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heart. Alice and William were, he gathered, to be married at Easter. Harry Emmett was to be William's best man. As Harry's cousin, Simon could surely contrive to be invited to the wedding feast. From then on he would press steadily to his goal. He was earning well, he could afford to marry.

In the next three months Simon daydreamed often about his Emily. Quite often he saw her in the morning or evening tram, for Alice and Emily were "menders" at Syke Mill; he observed her keenly, and was ever more satisfied.

They grew to a nodding acquaintance; the bend of her head was shy and graceful. They spoke; the words they exchanged were only those of greeting and farewell, but they were enough to reveal her voice as sweet and low. Simon imagined himself at Alice's wedding in Marthwaite Baptist chapel, at the party afterwards in the Sunday School. He would sit next to Emily and begin his courtship.

Towards the end of these three months Harry developed a habit of travelling on the upper deck of the tram, always occupied by men only, because there one was allowed to smoke. Thus he did not come into contact with the Shepherd sisters. It seemed to Simon, too, that Harry's greetings to Alice and Emily as they left the tram had also become curt or non-existent. Was it possible, perhaps, that Harry had divined his cousin's attachment and wished to keep out of the way? Nothing was less likely from the carefree Harry! Still, it was an agreeable thought.

Then, one morning in early spring, it chanced that the upper deck was full before the cousins reached it, and Harry, Simon, and the two girls were grouped as on the morning when Simon had first noticed Emily. She looked up at Harry. Her look was timid, beseeching, not quite venturing to be reproachful, yet deeply sad. Harry looked back at her with a friendly, not ill-pleased but teasing smirk. At once Simon knew the whole story.

As the cousins passed through the great mill gates together, Simon grasped Harry's arm and muttered brutally in his ear, "You've got that girl into trouble."

"Which girl?" said Harry, laughing.

"Emily Shepherd."

"Well, where's the harm?" said Harry cheerfully. "We can be wed. There's plenty of time yet."

But in this Harry was wrong, for by eleven o'clock that morning he was dead. As Harry and Simon were carrying a piece of cloth interspersed with press papers, Harry's foot slipped forward, he fell on his back, his grip was jerked loose, and the whole massive load (more than a hundredweight) came down on his belly. Simon stood transfixed, pale and breathless, clutching the other side of the pile till his muscles gave way and he was obliged to lower it to the ground.

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The foreman cried in anguish, "He's nowt but a bloody mess!"

It was too true.

At the inquest the verdict was, of course, "Accidental Death." The foreman's repeated bewilderment that a skilled worker like Harry Emmett—a wrestler nimble on his feet, too—should slip at a job he'd done for upwards of three years was partly explained by the discovery of a patch of oil on the sole of Harry's right clog—he must have stepped into some oil beside the engine room, on his way across the mill yard.

The coroner made some rather cutting remarks about keeping working premises clean, and Mr. Brigg Oldroyd the younger—old Brigg was getting a bit past work now and left most of the management details of Syke Mill to his son—was furious. He paid quite a nice sum in compensation, however, which of course went to Harry's aunt.

On the night after the funeral, which was well attended, Simon went to the Shepherds' terrace house. Mr. Shepherd, a very strict Baptist, was out at a Chapel function, as Simon happened to know, and most fortunately he had taken his wife with him. It was therefore Alice who opened the door. She gave Simon a hard look.

"I wanted just to have a word with Emily," said Simon mildly.

"Well, you can't," snapped Alice, and made to close the door.

"I'm Harry's cousin, after all," said Simon as before.

An angry exclamation exploded from Alice's lips. "Much good that'll do her!"

"You might be wrong there," said Simon. His words were meek but his tone was now hard.

Looks of rejection, hope, doubt, and perplexity chased each other across Alice's pleasant face.

"Well, come in then," she said at last, drawing back the door. "But don't stay long. She's upset, like."

Simon took off his cap and entered. Emily was sitting hunched by the fire, weeping. The eyes she lifted to him were full of grief and despair.

"Harry's death has been a great blow to you, lass," said Simon tenderly.

Tears rolled down Emily's cheeks and she sadly bowed her head.

"Don't go to upset her now," commanded Alice.

"You clear out and leave us alone," said Simon with sudden ferocity.

"Well," said Alice, taken aback. "I don't know. Well, I'll go upstairs for a minute if you like. Do you want to talk to Simon, Em?"

"I don't mind," said Emily, completely listless.

"You've only to call if you want me," said Alice, loath to leave her.

Simon gave her an impatient scowl and she hurried off up the narrow stairs.

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"Now, Emily," said Simon, drawing up a chair and sitting down beside her, "stop blubbering and listen to what I say. Your Alice and William Brearley are getting wed come Easter. Lets us be wed on t'same day, eh?"

Emily's eyes opened wide and she stared at him in a kind of horror.

"I can't, Simon," she said faintly at length.

"Yes, you can. I know how it was —" he meant to say *how it was between you and Harry,* but he absolutely could not force out the words, and fell silent. There was a pause. "Child would have his father's name, choose how," he said at length, very low.

"Oh, Simon," murmured Emily, still staring.

"Nobody need ever know. Alice doesn't know, does she?"

"She knows I fancied Harry."

"But about the baby?"

"Not for certain," breathed Emily.

"Well, there you are, then. Your father need never know," said Simon grimly, pressing his point.

As he had expected, a look of fear crossed Emily's face—he knew well enough what her pious father would say when he discovered her moral lapse.

"Say yes. Everyone will be pleased."

"And you, Simon? What about you? Would you be pleased?"

"I've always wanted you, Emily," said Simon.

His absolute sincerity carried conviction.

"You're a good man, Simon," said Emily.

"I shall always be good to you, love. You can count on that."

"And to the child?" panted Emily.

"And to your child. You agree, then?"

There was a pause. Then Emily raised glowing eyes.

"I agree."

"Give us your hand on it," said Simon, smiling.

Her warm, pulsating hand quivered in his, which she found cool and sinewy. But it was not only her own reputation, her own future, which she thought of as she entrusted herself to Simon; it was the coming child's. He would be safe and cared-for, the "legitimate" son of a strong and prosperous father. For herself, she would never love any man now that Harry was gone; Simon would be as good a husband as any.

They arranged to be married at Eastertide. The Marthwaite folk, when they heard of the approaching nuptials, imagined they had been mistaken when they thought Emily was sweet on Harry Emmett and Harry on Emily.

"Happen it was a kind of cover, like, for Simon."

"Aye. Or happen Harry backed out, like, when he saw Simon was serious."

"Aye, happen. It's true Harry had

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a dozen girls, he didn't need to take Simon's."

"You'd think a girl would fancy Harry, though, of the pair."

"There's no accounting for women's fancies."

"There is *not*. Still, Simon's a right decent chap. Steady and that."

"He is. He's all right, is Simon."

Old Mr. Shepherd, when he discovered his daughter's condition, gave Simon, to whom he naturally attributed it, a furious harangue about his immoral anticipation of wedlock. Simon listened in silence.

"Don't you care at all for your sin?" thundered Emily's father.

"I regret the matter with my whole heart and soul," said Simon emphatically.

Old Shepherd was somewhat mollified.

At any rate, the secret of Harry's paternity was firmly kept, and Simon and Emily were married at Easter without more than the mild scandal usual in such cases of belated weddings.

They took up their abode with the old aunt. She, however, had been broken in spirit by Harry's death, for he had always been her favourite, and physical decay, accompanied by the customary lack of control of foot and hand, was soon followed by mental incoherence. Emily tended her with loving care, but it was not long before Simon was summoned from work by the news that his aunt had had a serious fall. She died two days later.

The landlord of the cottage was perfectly willing to rent it to Simon, but though at first Simon intended to accept this offer, his intention presently wavered. This was after his wife had been delivered of a son, a fair, pretty, delicate child who was baptised as Wilfred.

When Wilfred was a month old, Simon asked for an interview with the owner of Syke Mill. He was shown into the presence of Mr. Brigg Oldroyd the younger, who turned on him one of those piercing glances which his workmen had learned to dread. His tone, however, was not unkind as he asked Emmett his errand.

"William Brearley, my brother-in-law, tells me your lot are wanting a gamekeeper for your shooting on Marthwaite Moor."

"That is so."

"I should like to apply for the job."

"But why?" said Brigg, surprised. "You know nothing about gamekeeping."

"Aye, but I do. I've been about with William Brearley a lot, and he's taught me the job."

"You've a good job here. You're a good worker, and I've been expecting to promote you to foreman in a few years.

"I want to leave."

"Why?"

"That's nobody's business but mine," muttered Simon.

"That is true," said Brigg coldly. As he spoke he remembered having

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heard something, some sort of gossip, about Emmett's wife. He added in a more sympathetic tone, "Are your workmates making you uncomfortable?"

"They'd best not try," said Simon grimly.

There was a pause. Brigg observed that sweat stood on the man's forehead.

"Well, I can't promise anything, but I've reason to believe you're an honest man and a conscientious worker, so I'll recommend you to our shooting syndicate. But I think you're making a mistake, Emmett, to leave a good job for some foolish notion."

"I can't seem to fancy the place since Harry died," blurted Simon.

"Ah. I see. I respect your feeling. I'll recommend you," said Brigg, nodding dismissal.

Simon obtained the gamekeeper's post, and he moved with Emily and his cousin's child to a neat stone cottage in a fold of the moors, built for their gamekeeper by the shooting syndicate. It was a remote spot, though with a handy stream and a glorious view. Simon was happy there. Something in the bleak landscape—the dark rocks, the rough pale grass, the purple heather, the stubborn winds raging over the long slopes—fed his soul, and he enjoyed "keeping down" the vermin.

Besides, it was good to be alone, not always on one's guard. Nobody asked what Emily thought about the move, and Emily offered no comment. She had always been quiet and submissive, and she continued in this dutiful trend. Emmett was a considerate and devoted husband and in good employment, and they lived in modest but dependable comfort. Pity they had no (or, no more) children.

In fact, the Emmetts enjoyed a quiet peace for several years, until little Wilfred began to walk and talk and play. It then appeared that unfortunately he was a little—it is difficult to find a word, for the disability seemed so slight—but he was really a little silly, a little "wanting." His eyes were very wide and bright, his laugh shrill and loud; he ran about grinning, asked foolish questions and pestered people, and if rebuked he burst into violent tears. When he had a bad cold, which was all too often, he kept his mother on the run all day, wanting this and that, calling her to his bedside and clinging frantically to her when she came.

"It's strange a sharp 'un like Simon Emmett should have such a daft lad," mused Marthwaite men.

"Well, you never know with childer," replied their wives. "Besides, Emily—she's not over clever."

"True. Happen that's what's wrong."

"And she spoils Wilf."

"She does. But Simon's a good father. He does his best, choose how."

But as Wilfred grew into a thin, lanky, febrile boy, and his over-

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bright eyes, high giggle, long clumsy feet, and sudden frenzies remained permanent features of his personality, Marthwaite's respect and sympathy for Simon in his handling of the boy turned to irritation. The truth was, Wilfred's silliness increased and became tiresome. At times Marthwaite actually expressed its irritation to Simon, who received it in sour silence.

"I'm sorry Wilf's been a bit trying tonight, William," said Simon to the Brearleys as they left the Emmetts' cottage one Sunday after an evening of silly, maddening exhibitionism on Wilfred's part. The boy had upset his teacup, reached across the table to snatch a scone, and at his mother's mild reprimand had pulled a face, struck out at her, and struggled wildly, wailing, when Simon had gently but firmly restrained his hands; and later the boy had continually interrupted the grown-ups' talk round the fire by childish demands for attention.

"I don't know how you can put up with it, Simon," said Brearley, his usually kind tones rough with vexation. "I couldn't be so patient with him myself. If I were your father I'd give you a good clout over the ear-hole," he said sharply to Wilfred, who was dancing and giggling round the departing guests. "It might do him good, you know, Simon."

"I don't like to upset Emily," said Simon, glancing back at his wife. "She dotes on him, you see."

"Emily spoils him," said Alice with some asperity.

If they only knew, thought Simon, compressing his lips, what iron control he had to exercise over himself to behave calmly over Wilfred's silly escapades, so foreign to his own decorous inclinations! But of course Emily had suffered a shock from Harry's death, while she was carrying the boy; hence his disability; there was no more to say.

Wilfred reached the age of twelve, and a new trouble arose.

"He wants to go and be a half-timer, Simon," said Emily.

"Oh, nonsense," said Simon. "Why should he want to go into the mill so young?"

"Two of Alice's boys go. They're his cousins, after all."

"William and Alice have four children to rear, we've one. I can well afford to keep him full time at school."

"Your father doesn't want thee to be a half-timer, Wilf," said Emily gently to her son when he returned from school.

Wilfred threw himself on her breast with a wailing cry.

"I want to go! I want to go wi' Bill and Jack!"

Emily's arms closed about him and she rocked him gently to and fro with that glowing look of love in her soft dark eyes which always turned Simon's bowels to water. "Never mind, love. Never mind."

"I want to go!" screamed Wilfred.

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"You're too young yet. We want you at home for a while yet," said Simon.

Throbbing with fury—for the matter was one of status—and with frustration because he had no child of his own, Simon yet commanded his tone to a decent mildness as he told this lie.

Wilfred looked up from his mother's breast and cried shrewdly, "No, you don't. I want to go wi' Bill and Jack," he repeated, sticking out his heavy lower lip.

"After all, Simon, if he doesn't go to the mill, where will he go?" said Emily. "When he gets a bit older, I mean. I mean—on the moors with you—I don't think—"

Her voice trailed away, submissive as always, but in this case she spoke sense, reflected Simon. Wilfred could certainly not be trusted with a gun.

The argument—mute on Emily's part, hysterical on Wilfred's, outwardly calm on Simon's—continued for several days. Eventually Simon, as he had expected from the first, gave in. Application had to be made to the head teacher at Marthwaite school, and exemption sought from school. It appeared that Wilfred would be obliged to put in some three hundred attendances at school every year. This sounded a large number, but when worked out it meant only a few hours at school, morning or afternoon, each week. The rest of his time he could spend at the mill.

"I can't see how they learn anything," grumbled Simon.

"He wants to go, Simon," said Emily softly.

"That's you all over, Emily, you give in to what anybody wants,' thought Simon, remembering her surrender to Harry's wishes.

But he did not say it aloud. Instead, though it was September, the height of the shooting season, he made time to go doggedly down the Ire Valley to Syke Mill to ask for a half-timer's job for Wilfred.

"You, Emmett? I hope you're not wanting to change your job again?" said Brigg.

"No. I hope I give satisfaction on t'moor," said Simon.

"You do."

Simon made his request. Brigg raised his eyebrows and thus confirmed Simon's private view—that Wilfred was dragging him down, would always drag him down. The request, however, was granted. Simon went off up the moor having made, he thought, all the necessary arrangements for the boy's début as a half-timer next Monday; but Simon was sore at heart.

It was afternoon by the time he got home. Emily was pleased when he told her of his arrangements for Wilfred, and this further darkened his mood. Having snatched a hasty meal, he took down his gun from above the hearth and went out to empty and reset his traps. Stoats, weasels, foxes, and, of course, poachers were his eternal enemies—

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nothing scared off poachers more than the sight of a gamekeeper with a gun, reflected Simon grimly. The week-end would see a big shoot on his moor, and he meant his employers to have plenty of birds available.

Suddenly, at the end of the afternoon, Wilfred came running over the edge of the moorland towards him. The boy plunged down into the hollow where Simon happened to be standing, waving his arms and shouting wildly, "*You* did it! *You* did it!"

"Is there summat wrong wi' your mother?" cried Simon, alarmed.

"No. *You* did it! You didn't want me to go to the mill!"

"What are you talking about, Wilfred," said Simon in his artifically mild tone, biting back his vexation, for malice blazed in the boy's mad blue eyes and his thin pale face was horridly distorted.

"*You* told them! *You* made them!"

"Tell me what is wrong, Wilfred," said Simon soothingly.

"The head teacher says I can't have exemption and be a half-timer," panted Wilfred.

"But why not? He told me he thought you could."

"Yes, yes. But now he says he's inquired further about me, and I haven't reached the necessary standard of proficiency," screamed Wilfred, blurring and muddling these obviously quoted words. "I can't read."

"What, at twelve years old?"

"Mother's been trying to teach me," whimpered Wilfred. "They haven't time to bother with me, at school. But you told them!"

Suddenly all the frightful exasperations of his life—Harry, Wilfred, no children of his own, his own everlasting repression, this imbecile boy impossible to get rid of, this unnecessary humiliation, now doubled, about half-timing, Emily's love for Harry's son—all this boiled up agonisingly in Simon's brain. The fury of years seethed, exploded. He raised his gun, placed it against Wilfred's breast, and fired.

After the shot, a strange silence.

Simon lowered his gun to the ground, leaned on it, and sighed heavily.

The boy was dead, it seemed. Yes, he was dead; his body lay sprawled and motionless. Another matter about which Simon must learn to keep silence, for Emily must never know her husband's part in Wilfred's death. Never. The boy's death would break her heart, in any case. For the time. But she would get over it. Wilfred had snatched Simon's gun, of course—it was just the silly sort of thing he would do—and accidently jerked the trigger and shot himself. Such accidents were always happening. Well! So it was, then. No more Wilfred. A relief, after all!

Simon accepted grimly the task of concealment which lay before him, shouldered it, sighed and raised his eyes, wondering whether

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to drag Wilfred home alone, or seek Brearley's help.

On the rim of the hollow stood Brearley, gazing down at him.

"William! Thank God you're here! The boy's shot himself by accident! Help me take him home!"

"I saw you," gasped Brearley, his eyes staring, his throat choked, with horror. "You shot him. I saw you."

"No!" cried Simon, springing forward.

Brearley turned and fled.

Simon, fiercely clutching his gun, chased him headlong over the wiry heather, the tussocks of rough grass, the black peaty marsh. For a moment he disappeared from view, but when Simon bounded up a slope, Brearley lay crouched face downwards in the hollow beyond—he had tripped, or perhaps merely sought to hide from his pursuer. Simon sprang down and shot him dead, the bullet entering behind his ear.

Again the strange silence, into which presently intruded the sound of the rising wind and his own gasping breath.

After a while these calmed, and Simon became capable of rational thought. Well! His story must be changed now. Some poacher must obviously been come upon by Brearley, and shot him when threatened with arrest—Brearley had no gun with him. The boy Wilfred had by chance seen the murder and fled, been caught and killed by the murderer in fear for his life.

But Simon could not know of this, must not know of this; best to go home and pretend complete ignorance; anxiety at Wilfred's continued absence could arise later, and leave it to Alice to worry when her husband did not return. Pity about Brearley. Always a pleasant chap.

Simon cleaned his gun and returned home.

"Wilfred not home yet?" he said to his wife.

"He came, but he went out on t'moor to seek you."

"Oh? He didn't find me."

"He were worried, like, because teacher said after all he couldn't have exemption to be a half-timer."

"Oh? Why were that?"

"Nay, I couldn't right make it out," said Emily.

This might be true, but it might more probably be an attempt to conceal and diminish the reading trouble. It was Emily's habit thus to try to hide Wilfred's defects from her husband. Simon knew this habit all too well; it maddened him. But now that Wilfred would no longer cause this trouble, he forgave Emily, smiled lovingly at her, and said no more.

As the evening wore on and darkness fell, Emily became very uneasy about her son. She went to the door and stood gazing out into the dark, calling, "Wilfred! Wilf!" in her soft tones. The pathos of this appeal which could never be answered, and the look of her perplexed eyes, usually so clear, struck Simon to the

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heart as he went to console her.

"Sit down, love. He'll come in when he's hungry."

"But where can he be? You didn't see him, did you?"

"I told you, no."

"Happen he's afraid to come now because he thinks you'll scold him for being late."

"Happen he is," said Simon gravely, nodding.

After some repetitions of this scene Simon sighed and took down his jacket.

"I'll go out and have a look for him," he said kindly.

"Thank you, thank you," said Emily, softly weeping. "You're a good father to him, Simon."

To search these miles of rolling moorland was a difficult task at any time; in the dark it was almost impossible. Though Simon knew the moors well, nobody would be surprised by his lack of success in a night search. He tramped about, however, to give an air of verisimilitude to his proceedings, and as the night turned wet and wild, rain on his shoulders and peaty mud on his boots lent support to the tale he would have to tell.

It occurred to him to conceal Wilfred's body, though not too deeply; a delay in its discovery, he thought, a little mystery, would be useful in clouding the true course of events. So, dragging the body behind a rock, he covered it with earth and bracken. Brearley's body, since it lay on the stretch of moor in Brearley's care, he thought safe to leave exposed.

He returned home to find Brearley's two sons in his kitchen, making anxious inquiries about their father. Had Uncle Simon seen him?

"No. But I shouldn't worry. He'll be out after poachers," said Simon. "Tell you what," he added as the boys' faces remained troubled, "if he isn't back by morning I'll go down to Marthwaite and tell the police. He might have met up with Wilfred—one of them might have had an accident, and the other not like to leave him, you know. Aye, we'll get the police to search."

This plan was carried out next morning, neither of the missing persons having returned. Not only the police, but unofficial Marthwaite men, with instinctive goodwill, took part in the search. These latter turned first to Brearley's beat, for they thought his disappearance more serious than that of an irresponsible boy, who might merely have run away and be in hiding.

They soon found the dead gamekeeper, and observed that he was not carrying a gun. The police, to Simon's concealed chagrin, found Wilfred sooner than he had hoped, for one of them perceived the metal tips of Wilfred's clogs glittering in the sunlight to which the stormy night had given place, and the body was unearthed.

"Fancy the murderer leaving his feet uncovered!" said a young policeman. "Seems daft to me."

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"Murderer didn't know he'd left feet uncovered. Lad was buried in the dark, that's what it means," deduced the sergeant.

"Aye, it would seem so," agreed Simon with a puzzled look.

"How do you see it, then, Mr. Emmett?" asked the sergeant.

"Brearley caught a poacher, and the poacher shot him, and Wilfred saw it, and the poacher chased him and shot him to prevent him telling—that's how it looks to me."

"What, a poacher in daylight?"

"Nay, it might have been in t'dark. Or twilight falling dark."

"That's so," said the sergeant.

When Wilfred's lifeless corpse was carried across the threshold of their home, Emily gave a great cry and fell unconscious, clutching at her son's cold hands as she fell. She lay in bed for several days, hardly moving. Simon, seeing her so distraught, understood better the magnitude of her collapse after Harry's demise. He gave her tender and unceasing care.

Meanwhile, the account of the events which Simon had devised to cover the two deaths was generally accepted, and the thought of an imaginary poacher filled men's minds. An entirely innocent man who had—it came out at the inquest and he admitted it frankly—been shooting that afternoon on the free, unleased portion of the moor, was suspected, questioned, arrested, brought before the Annotsfield magistrates, and remanded in custody. When this suspicion was first voiced to Simon he was staggered. But he instantly took hold of himself.

"I hope he gets off," he thought, "but I can't tell the truth, choose how. It would kill Emily. Nay, I know nowt of it," he said aloud in a worried tone. "I just don't know. I heard shots on the moor that afternoon, that's true."

By the time the hearing before the magistrates was resumed, Emily was well enough to attend, and insisted upon doing so.

Some Annotsfield men who did not know Simon's reputation as an honest man and a good father had been giving him rather odd looks lately when he went to the town on errands; so as Simon set out for the magistrates' court he felt quite uncertain as to whether he would return thence as an accused murderer or no. Accordingly, he dressed himself very neatly and shaved with special care.

As he climbed the steps to the court, with Emily and Alice in deep mourning beside him, he felt himself the mark of every eye, and carried himself with stony dignity. In spite of his short stature and thinning hair, his appearance commanded respect; the lofty carriage of his large head showed him as a man not lightly to be distrusted. The innocent accused, pale and hangdog, looked far more guilty than he, reflected Simon with satisfaction.

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This time, however, the accused man had secured from somewhere a sharp shrewd counsel, who produced and proved—not perhaps quite to the hilt but enough to convince any reasonable mind—an alibi for his client. The magistrates recalled Simon to the witness box.

"Hold hard," he urged himself as he calmly rose. "Keep the secret."

He set his jaw, advanced with a firm regular tread, and gave his replies in a quiet steady tone.

The magistrate took him again through his own meagre story of the day of the murder, and then, to his surprise, began to ask him questions about Wilfred.

"Was the boy quite normal?"

"He was a little backward," replied Simon.

"How backward?"

"Well—he couldn't read very well."

"At twelve years old?"

"His mother was trying to teach him," said Simon rather hastily, alive to a hint of censure.

"Backward, yes. But was he ever violent?"

"Never," said Simon emphatically. "He was a gentle, eager boy."

"Was he fond of his uncle?"

"His uncle?" repeated Simon, amazed.

"His uncle, William Brearley. Had his uncle not scolded him at times?"

With a shock Simon perceived that they suspected Wilfred of having shot his uncle and then himself, and Simon of having come upon the body and to conceal his son's crime, having removed the gun and buried Wilfred. This might have been a convenient hypothesis but for its effect upon Emily, who was already flushed and panting under its mere suggestion. He made haste to discredit it.

"Wilfred was always fond of his uncle. He went a good deal to Brearley's place, and played with the two boys, his cousins."

"Had Wilfred ever handled a gun?"

"Never. He was never allowed to touch a gun."

"Did you ever teach him how to fire a gun?"

"Never."

"Could he have had a gun in his possession, even for a few moments, on the afternoon of the murder?"

"Impossible. I had my gun with me, and as you've heard my sister-in-law say, Brearley left home without his gun."

The hearing ended with the discharge of the innocent accused, and without any other accusation being made.

"I'm glad he got off, for I don't think he did it," said Simon soberly as he drove Alice and Emily home in the trap he had hired.

The sisters were too sunk in grief, it seemed, to reply. But when, having left Alice at the cottage she must soon vacate, the Emmetts presently found themselves in their own home, Emily turned her dark lumi-

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nous eyes steadily on her husband, and asked in a low tone, "Who do you think killed my son, Simon?"

"We shall never know," replied Simon with a sigh.

He sighed because he felt the burden of secrecy, the need to conceal, heavy upon his shoulders. It would rest there, he knew, till the day he died.

Sometimes, in the years that followed, he felt the burden almost intolerable. It was his first thought in the morning, his last at night: *keep the secret.* Occasionally when he was out on the moors in the driving winds and bright cold sunshine of March, in the still shimmering heat of August, in the white dazzling snow of January, he felt a lifting of the heart, as if he might be about to be happy; but instantly the weight of the secret closed down on him again and forbade it. The feeling he had when he took the passive Emily in his arms was entirely different—a hot passion, a guilty unrelenting triumph.

Again, when he helped Alice to regain her job as a mender, supervised her removal back to Marthwaite—her parents took her in—presently found jobs for her growing sons and "gave away" her older daughter in a suitable marriage, Simon smiled to himself and felt a warmth about his heart. But in a moment the warmth chilled and his heavy features hardened again into sternness; he could not afford to relax.

The years rolled on. Simon lived a life of impeccable integrity, prospered in his work, saved money, bought some cottage property in Marthwaite which proved a good investment. He was a devoted and considerate husband, a kind and helpful uncle—pity he had no children—and a most capable secretary and treasurer to various Ire Valley good works he undertook.

All this time, Simon kept his secret. For a few weeks after the moor murders, local discussion raged and diverse and extraordinary theories were propounded, some of them uncomfortable to Simon; but as the months passed the matter grew stale, and presently a new generation grew up who had scracely heard of the event.

The strain of the secret aged Simon before his time. His shoulders bowed, his thin hair whitened, his mouth set in a hard line. But he remained a respected figure, and steadfastly kept his secret from his wife.

Then the day came when Simon suffered a stroke. It happened while he was out on the moor with an Oldroyd shooting party. Brigg Oldroyd's son Francis was an excellent shot, and followed his own notions with the impetuosity of youth. Simon's advice had previously kept the shooting butts away from the place of Wilfred's death, but young Mr. Francis had demanded that butts be aligned within twenty yards of that fatal hollow.

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The position he had chosen was a good one and Simon could not have opposed it without displaying an undue sensitivity. So he had superintended the butts' erection with his customary efficiency, but when the first shot rang out from them he fell to the ground.

He found himself in bed in his own home, with the doctor just turning away and Alice and Emily seated at his bedside. From the gravity of their expressions and his own sensations, or lack of them, he realized at once that he was a dying man. He fixed his eyes on Emily with intense yearning.

"I must be alone with Simon, Alice," murmured Emily. "Leave us together."

Alice bowed her head and left the the room.

Yes, he was dying, reflected Simon. Pity. Yet, in a way, he was relieved. In a few minutes his life would be over, and he would have succeeded in his great aim—he would have kept his secret to the end. No longer must he maintain his incessant watch and ward. He felt himself slipping towards the dark.

Yes, it was a relief, his success. Now Emily would never know. The long struggle was over.

He moved his lips to make the motion of a kiss. Emily bent over him. But she did not yield him an embrace. Her eyes were hard and burning.

"I know your secret, Simon," she murmured. "I've always known."

Simon gazed at her in horror.

"How—how—"

"In the court, when you told the magistrates I was trying to teach Wilfred to read. You couldn't have known that unless you'd seen him that afternoon. We'd kept all that bother about his reading from you. I told him, when he went out to look for you, he'd better make a clean breast of it."

"Then why—why—"

"Why didn't I tell on you? I owed you silence, Simon, for marrying me and giving Wilfred a name."

"Emily—"

"I shall never tell on you, Simon, never. But I shall never forgive you."

Simon looked at her lovingly, and smiled, and died.

He smiled with joy. He could still think well of himself, since Emily did not know his secret. For it was not, in fact, a patch of oil which had caused Harry to fall, all those long years ago. Simon with a well-placed foot had tripped his cousin.

NEXT MONTH . . .

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